

Housing choices and community care

A study carried out in Hampshire by Judith Hudson, Lynn Watson and Graham Allan of the University of Southampton looked at the factors influencing the housing preferences of people with extra support needs, and the channels people use to gain access to suitable accommodation and support. The great majority were in circumstances which gave them no statutory entitlement to housing, and very few had had a formal assessment of their support needs under the system of care management. The research found that:

- f** Many people want to move but are not in a crisis situation and do not have an immediate imperative to do so. Systems are not in place to encourage and assist such non-crisis moves, with the result that people can wait years to move out of the parental home or residential care.
- f** Those who make progress usually do so through making use of an informed and/or committed professional contact. Many of the professionals concerned have not had specific training on housing issues and may rely heavily on known or standard solutions (such as specialist accommodation facilities). Some individuals obtain peer support and advice from disabled people's organisations.
- f** Those wanting self-contained housing tend to see obtaining suitable accommodation as their first priority, to be followed by negotiations over support services. This runs counter to the assumption in community care policy that housing needs are assessed as part of an individual's community care assessment.
- f** People who live in sheltered settings have usually had little opportunity to develop the skills of money management and running a household. The lack of such skills holds people back from pushing for more independent housing, even when this is what they would like.
- f** The housing allocation process assumes people are poised to move and can make a rapid response to a given offer. This takes little account of the long-term applicant who requires extra support to establish and sustain a tenancy.

Introduction

Independent living is promoted by the Government for all community care groups, yet assisting people to move to appropriate housing is not seen by policy makers as central to the community care task. People looking for housing and support services face obstacles which arise from a shortage of appropriate provision, and most lack the resources to buy their way into the housing market and organise their own support. This study set out to explore what factors influence the housing preferences of people with extra support needs, and the channels people used to obtain suitable accommodation and support.

Impetus for moving

The reasons for wanting to move varied according to current living situation. Those in the parental home wanted to gain independence or, in a small number of instances, to escape a situation of increasing family tension. Those in shared supported housing either felt they no longer needed the support provided or, again in a small number of cases, they did not get on with one or more of the other residents or simply did not like shared living. For people living in residential homes, the main reasons given for moving were the need for more freedom, more space and more money to spend. Those in their own self-contained housing who wished to move usually wanted a more suitably designed or larger property, or disliked the area where they were living.

Most of the study participants were in a position where they had to persuade others of their housing need before starting the process of negotiating for the right kind of accommodation and support. The exception to this was those living in shared supported housing, where moving on to other housing is often seen as part of a natural progression. Here, too, however, there were examples of people becoming stuck in their accommodation because they were not awarded any priority for a tenancy in local council or housing association stock.

While most saw their own housing need as clear-cut, they recognised that in order to make progress they would have to argue their case or find someone else to act on their behalf. The great majority were in circumstances which gave them no statutory entitlement to housing and very few had had a formal assessment of their support needs under the system of care management.

Communication with 'the system'

The four main sources of practical help and advice were: housing support workers; social workers; occupational therapists; and council officers concerned with applications for grants and

adaptations. Social workers advising people wishing to leave residential care or the parental home often made referrals to specific services, such as a social services adult placement scheme, rather than offering broader information on housing and support options.

Individual housing preferences reflected ideas about a desired lifestyle and level of responsibility. While some people wanted accommodation with integral support, those respondents seeking self-contained accommodation usually focused first on the housing. An offer of housing can give substantial leverage in ensuring the delivery of appropriate support.

Some people found it very difficult to attract the interest of a professional to help them through the process of achieving a move. Making a housing application could also be quite a struggle, with housing officers in some cases putting forward obstacles or providing only partial information. Some were successful in obtaining accommodation, but only after much persistence on their part or through the active support of a particular officer.

John, who has a hearing impairment, was living with his parents. He had been wanting to move for more than a year. His social worker advised him to approach the council and he placed his name on the waiting list. A housing officer explained that he would not get an offer for a long time but did not offer any other options. John said he was now relying on his father to find him accommodation.

Sophie was living in self-contained accommodation within a group of supported flats for people with mental health problems. The accommodation is not intended to be long term. When she approached the council for rehousing, she was asked if she was a 'one-parent family' but no mention was made of other reasons which might give her some housing priority. She planned to approach social services to check out her position before giving up the idea of council accommodation.

Martin was living with his father, who did not allow him to use most of the house. He applied for a one-bedroom flat but was told that without top medical priority he could only hope for a bedsit. He felt such accommodation would be too claustrophobic and isolating for him. After more than two years on the register, a new housing officer became involved and he was offered a suitable flat within six weeks of this officer's initial visit.

Expectations and housing options

People lack access to comprehensive written information on the housing options and support services in their area. Such information tends to be produced in a piecemeal fashion (e.g. lists of residential homes) and to exclude more imaginative combinations of accommodation and support (e.g. examples of care packages for people with varying needs). Information on the financial aspects of living in different forms of accommodation is also lacking.

The respondents with learning disabilities tended to think in terms of a staged progression. Most of those wanting to leave the parental home said they wanted to live in shared housing or a residential home, while those in shared accommodation usually opted for self-contained housing. The desire for social contact within the home environment was particularly significant among younger people living with their parents. The need for more formal support appeared to play a much smaller part in determining people's housing choices.

Among those with mental health problems, there was a strong preference for self-contained housing. There was great concern among this group to avoid types of accommodation which were seen as having a 'special needs' tag. However, those in shared housing generally made positive comments about their current accommodation and felt it had helped them to manage with less support. Many were anxious about how they would cope financially in their new accommodation and a smaller number worried about being lonely. They had expectations of continuing support in their own tenancies, although this was often vaguely described and the possible sources of such support were sometimes unclear.

The respondents with physical disabilities also strongly preferred self-contained housing for their next move. This included the majority of those in the parental home. Those living in residential homes tended to be more cautious, sometimes assuming that the level of support needed would preclude such an option.

Almost all of those intending to move on from shared housing or hostels in the near future were going to move to linked move-on housing with support from the same organisation. While most were appreciative of this arrangement and some commented favourably on the quality and location of the move-on housing, others felt that the assumptions about a staged process had proved an obstacle to them obtaining the kind of accommodation they wanted.

"They didn't want to give me a flat until they knew I could look after myself on my own ... but it has got nothing to do with them really. When you know you can do it, you can do it ... It just took a long time to convince them." Simon moved from a hostel into a small shared house, where he lived for a year before moving on again into a housing association flat.

"It is K's choice (the keyworker in the hostel). She thinks I should go to the bedsit first anyway. If I had a choice I would rather go to L... C... (a small block of flats)." Georgina has lived in the hostel for two and a half years and thinks she will be in the bedsit for about six months before getting a flat.

Negotiating a move

The particular obstacles people had to overcome centred on: fears of (and subsequent adjustment to) a major change of environment and living circumstances; poor planning and communication; lack of suitable housing; inadequate support through the move; and financial constraints.

The fear of the change itself and of not coping in a new setting were recurrent themes. Some feared loneliness and others expressed concern about their ability to cope with the level of support services they anticipated receiving. While most people in shared housing felt they had been given the opportunity to develop skills and prepare for moving on, a number of those in larger residential homes felt the structures were lacking to facilitate such a move.

Craig has been in a residential home for the past fifteen years. He was offered a council flat, which he initially accepted but later turned down after thinking through the implications of living on his own. He has decided now to focus on developing his self-confidence and skills, like learning to manage his money, and would like to move initially to shared housing.

Lack of communication and liaison between the various agencies involved was a common experience and was often cited as a cause of delay. When a move required the participation of several different professionals, respondents frequently reported feeling confused and ill-informed. There was little evidence that formal care management was offering a more co-ordinated response, with only one person explicitly mentioning the involvement of a care manager in sorting out the complexities of the move.

The shortage of suitable housing was one of the main obstacles encountered. People felt they had little option but to accept the first offer of accommodation, for fear of losing the opportunity to move altogether. Allocations policies were regarded

as too rigid and not accounting for the needs and circumstances of the individual. Several respondents were originally rehoused in inappropriate accommodation and then found it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a transfer.

Financial anxieties were very much to the forefront. Assistance with household budgeting and dealing with the Department of Social Security benefits system were seen by many respondents as crucial to their success in establishing themselves in their new housing. Making the transition from a residential home into more independent housing is made more difficult both by the impossibility of saving up for the move and by the lack of opportunity to manage money while in residential care.

Frank had his name on the council waiting list for ten years. During this period, the only contact he had from them was their annual request to update the list. Finally, he received a letter offering him a one-bedroom flat. He only had a week to decide whether to accept this. "Well, although I was a bit desperate to move, when it came to it, I just couldn't, I didn't have the finances to buy all of that." He contacted social services to see if they could sort him out with items of furniture, but they were not able to respond. He rejected the offer.

About the study

The research involved in-depth interviews with 77 people in a range of living circumstances. The majority of participants were selected as having a current housing need. A smaller number who had recently changed their accommodation were also included.

The main sources for identifying study participants were social services professionals, social clubs/day centres, service user organisations and residential facilities. The support needed by the 77 people ranged from personal assistance with physical tasks to management of household finances, emotional support and help in establishing a daily routine. The age range was from 17 to 66.

Sixty-two people were interviewed once and a smaller group of 15 were interviewed twice, with a gap of 9 to 12 months. The study was carried out in four Districts within Hampshire during 1994/95.

Further information

For further information, contact Dr Graham Allan, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ (Tel: 01703 594539).

The full report, **Moving obstacles: Housing choices and community care**, is published by The Policy Press (price £11.95).

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- 155** Community care and housing for disabled people (Sep 95)

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