## Supporting people with learning disabilities to rent their own place: Regional and national discussions

## Introduction

This document presents a summary of the main findings from one national and eight regional roundtable events held on zoom in early 2021. The purpose of these events was to discuss renting in the **social housing** and **private rented** sectors and the support available for this for people with mild or moderate learning disabilities on the edges of social care eligibility in England. The events were attended by over 100 professionals and experts by experience including: people with learning disabilities, family carers, advocates, social care staff, social and private housing providers, representatives from local authorities, the NHS and voluntary and community organisations and key national policy experts.

These events were part of a larger research project funded by the National Institute for Health Research, School of Social Care Research and is a collaboration between the universities of Bristol and York, Riverside, Learning Disability England, Housing LIN and Stephen Lee Hodgkins. The project team also includes an advisory group of people with learning disabilities who rent their own homes and who also belong to self-advocacy groups (York People First; My Life, My Choice).

Each event followed the same format with a presentation from the research team followed by facilitated breakout sessions discussing three research questions and a final open discussion with all involved.

The findings below represent the experiences and views of those attending the meetings.

## Key Messages

People's experiences of renting, landlords and support reflected a mix of both positive and negative experiences. These varied across and within regions in relation to the availability and quality of housing, as well as the support available to find and maintain rented housing.

While experiences were diverse there were some key messages raised across the events.

* There is a shortage of housing in general which impacts on people with learning disabilities who wish to rent and who often do not have sufficient resources or priority to help them secure this limited housing.
* Social housing was often viewed as the first or preferred option for people with mild or moderate learning disabilities, but this sector was difficult to access.
* There were some positive examples of renting from private landlords, however there were also significant concerns over the quality and insecure nature of renting in the private sector.
* It was reported that formal social care support was often hard to obtain for people with mild or moderate learning disabilities renting their own homes.
* Practical and emotional support for renting a home was often provided by families who filled gaps in support. Families often described a lack of adequate information and/or support for themselves.
* There needs to be greater choice and better information available to people with learning disabilities who wish to rent their home. Social housing needs to be easier to access and private rented housing needs to be more secure with better quality controls.
* There needs to be more low-level support services available to people renting their own homes.
* Overall, there is a need for a greater policy priority on housing for people with learning disabilities, including better joint working between housing and social care.

## Experiences of renting in the social and private rented sectors

In general, people with a label of mild/moderate learning disability are often overlooked when it comes to housing support with priority often given to those with greater support needs. There is a housing shortage generally and social housing and private rented landlords can still sometimes view people with a mild/moderate learning disability as a ‘risky’ or ‘complex’ tenant which can prove a significant barrier.

### **Renting in the social sector (from a council or housing association)**

* It can be very challenging for individuals to find social housing, particularly in more densely populated areas where there are social housing shortages such as London.
* The process of applying for social housing, generally through Choice Based Lettings, is challenging, even where a person has advocates. The bidding process is difficult to understand and the competitive nature of it places significant pressure on people with learning disabilities.
* Some people living in social housing are better supported as housing officers can provide some limited support. We heard some good examples of housing associations who had dedicated housing officers for people with support needs.
* We heard that once allocated social housing, some individuals are waiting a long time before they can move in.

### **Renting in the private rented sector**

* The private rented sector is a diverse market which means that people’s experiences vary quite considerably.
* A lack of quality assurance measures and insecure tenancies in the private rented sector are a concern for people and can make for an unsuitable tenure model for people who are looking for a long-term home like many people with mild/moderate learning disability. We also heard concerns about access to adaptations, high rents, and repairs.
* A number of councils and housing associations lease property from private landlords to house people with mild/moderate learning disabilities. This was a model that could provide a greater range of accommodation in an area.
* We also heard about intermediary organisations that act as a managing agent between private landlords and people with mild/moderate learning disabilities and how this could work well providing support for both tenants and landlords.
* There is some appetite already amongst private landlords to provide supported tenancies. Incentives to attract the ‘right’ landlords to house people with learning disabilities could be considered. Landlords also needed better information to support this from commissioners.

## Experiences of support while renting

The majority of people with a mild/moderate learning disability have limited access to any social care support including finding and maintaining a tenancy because they do not meet the eligibility criteria for social care. For most people, support tends to come from family members. Some of the things that people need support with include, signing/understanding a tenancy agreement, getting to know their new local area, signing up for GPs and local services, helping transferring bills and keeping on top of rent.

* It was reported that local authorities and housing associations with dedicated housing officers for people with support needs are better able to support individuals.
* The voluntary and community sector can play an important part in helping people find and maintain their rented homes.
* We heard that some social workers provide some assistance with tenancies. However, this help often stops once the individual has been housed and there is little support to sustain a tenancy long term.
* There is a lack of accessible information and advice on the housing and support options for people with a mild/moderate learning disability. There should be additional funding for third sector organisations that are most likely to be effective intermediaries in offering support including self-advocacy/advocacy groups.
* Flexible housing support works well especially when it focuses on what people can do rather than what they cannot do (sometimes known as strength or asset-based support).
* The main reason for a lack of social care support is attributed to a limited amount of funding, particularly compared to the era of *Supporting People*. In the limited areas where *Supporting People* funding is still available, people with lower-level support needs are more likely to receive more effective support.

## What needs to change

People with a learning disability need to be seen as individuals who have the right to access the full range of housing options in their local communities, with appropriate levels of support that meets their needs, rather than being tied to particular forms of accommodation.

### **What needs to change in relation to housing?**

* People with a mild or moderate learning disability need to be given more and better choices about where they live and call home. This needs to be met by an increase in good quality social housing and by better quality more secure private renting options.
* The choice based letting system needs to be made much more accessible. Having a trusted and well-informed individual that supports someone through a move and maintaining their tenancy is essential.
* Access to social housing may be improved through the use of local lettings plans rather than through choice-based lettings.
* Better quality assurance systems are needed in the private rented sector to support private landlords and to give confidence to people with learning disabilities, family carers and the local council that this is a suitable tenure to meet their needs.
* People need better and clearer information and advice about their housing options. Additional funding is needed for third sector organisations to help with this.
* Reasonable adjustments and access to much more accessible documents and information need to be the norm across the social housing and private rented sector.
* Key organisations and local authorities need to advocate for people with learning disabilities as people entitled to hold tenancies, and as potential ‘excellent tenants’ as any other section of the community.

### **What needs to change with support?**

* Prevention type services have reduced as a result of local government funding reductions meaning that local authorities focus on their statutory responsibilities rather than preventative approaches. There is a need to fund local authorities to commission low-level support services with a ‘prevention focus’ that can support people into and to then sustain their tenancies.
* Local authorities need to better evidence the cost benefits of providing these low-level support services (which can help to avoid individuals presenting in the future with increased/higher levels of support needs). This case needs to continue to be made at local, regional and national level.
* COVID has provided a reminder of the value of low-level community support via local charities, religious organisations, and neighbourhood initiatives; better funding to underpin this sector is essential moving forward.

### **What needs to change in policy, commissioning and joint working?**

* The profound link between housing (home), social care and well-being should be better articulated and supported in policy and practice, including for people who may be at the margins of formal eligibility for social care. Fundamentally, there is a need for a long-term national strategy to facilitate more mainstream housing opportunities for people with learning disabilities.
* We heard that we need better integration of housing and support for people with a mild/moderate learning disability, particularly for those at the margin of eligibility for social care.
* Co-location of housing and social care services can sometimes enable a more holistic approach to housing support, for example through a ‘hub’ model, where housing and social care advice and assistance is brought together locally.
* There needs to be better opportunities for the voices of people with learning disabilities to be heard and to influence housing policy.
* There is a need to fund local authorities to be able to (re)commission low-level support services with a ‘prevention focus’ that can support people into and then sustain their tenancies.
* Local authorities need to better understand their localities and demographics so they can plan better for future housing provision for people on the ‘boundary’ of social care eligibility including the potential for the use of both the social and private rented sector.
* Without downplaying the impact of COVID, it has revealed the benefits of flexible, sometimes impromptu and creative ways of providing community-level support to people with little or no formal social care support in their own rented homes and we heard examples of how important this has been to keep people well during this time.

## Next Steps

These events were part of the first stage, in a two-stage research project, exploring renting and support for people with mild or moderate learning disabilities on the edges of social care. This initial stage of the research has also included a review of local authority learning disability strategies

The next stage of the research involves interviewing people with learning disabilities who currently rent in the social housing and private rented sectors, including the use of creative methods to illustrate the meaning of home. As well as talking to tenants, we will also (with permission) interview those who provide support to them to build a holistic picture of both what works well and what could be improved.

An easy-read version of this summary can be found here: [enter web-address]

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If you have any questions about the research, please email eppie.leishman@york.ac.uk.

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