



**Irish Wheelchair Association Recommendations**  
**on**  
**Amendments to The Housing Bill '08**

**December 2008**

Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA) Response to the Housing Bill 2008

Part 1 of this paper sets out the Irish Wheelchair Association Response to the Housing Bill 2008

Part 2 of this paper sets out the basis for the Irish Wheelchair Association Response

## **Part 1**

### **1. Irish Wheelchair Association Recommendations on Housing Bill '08**

The stated intent of the Housing Bill '08 is to give effect to the programme of social housing reform measures outlined in the Department of the Environment's policy document "Delivering Homes Sustaining Communities". The IWA is therefore recommending that the Housing Bill 2008 in taking the policy reform measures from "Delivering Homes Sustaining Communities", and from the Department of the Environment Sectoral Plan and T16, be amended to place specific emphasis within the Bill on;

- the way of determining and delivering on the housing need of people with disabilities
- creating a sustainable housing stock capable of accommodating specific and changing housing needs over a lifetime.

Recent policy directives in relation to housing provision to people with disabilities are very welcome as is the consultative approach in the development of the Housing Strategy by the Department of the Environment. In the opinion of the IWA these relatively recent policy directives re housing and people with disabilities now need to be underpinned within Housing Legislation. This has been the approach for other groups with very specific housing requirements such as Travellers and People who are Homeless. The '98 Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act required Local Authorities to set out Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The 1988 Housing Act focused on defining Homelessness and required local authorities to carry out periodic assessment of need of homeless people and to respond accordingly. This IWA response to the Housing Bill 2008 recommends a similar approach in responding to the housing need of people with disabilities

**1.1** The IWA recommends that a specific emphasis on delivering housing services to people with disabilities be interspersed throughout the Housing Bill and concern the following areas;

**1.11** A fundamental recognition that for people with disabilities future planning to address housing and support needs is a valid and pragmatic activity for both the individual and for the state. That this future planning continues to be valid and pragmatic when the person is living within the family home which may have previously been adapted when that person was a child. Establish the fact within the Bill that such people, all other application criteria being equal, are entitled to be on social housing lists.

**1.12** Schemes of Letting Priorities in relation to people with disabilities should operate in a clear and consistent manner across the country.

**1.13** Housing Services Plans and Housing Actions Programme will both need to demonstrate specific focus on the housing need of people with disabilities. Housing Action Plans should give targets and time frames for social housing providers to deliver on the housing need of people with disabilities. In the development of these plans and in having due regard to any existing Housing Strategies e.g. for Travellers, for the Homeless and for Older People, the Local Authorities would include within planned provisions for these groups, appropriate options for members of these groups with disabilities.

**1.14** In recognising the dearth of information and knowledge regarding the real housing need of people with disabilities the Minister should direct the Local Authorities to understand and determine the real need by;

- reference to the Housing List
- regular and ongoing consultation with the HSE, local hospitals and disability representative groups to develop and expand the real needs baseline information.
- directing the Local Authorities to convene a Disability Consultative Committee, if none exists, along with the HSE and local disability groups
- allowing for developing need, not currently registered, over the life of the Services and Housing Action Plan, based on the knowledge and previous experiences of the Consultative Committee
- developing a local Housing Strategy for People with Disabilities

**1.15** The Minister should within the Bill direct the Local Authorities to strengthen the expectation and the role of Housing Associations and Housing Co Operatives to deliver appropriate housing options, within general needs housing, to people with disabilities.

**1.16** The Minister should underpin the intent to create sustainable communities and counteract undue segregation by also naming people with disabilities (living in individual or in shared accommodation), as a group of people whom a sustainable community would include. To make this intent a reality, the Minister should name the different levels of access to be provided within a sustainable community as Lifetime Homes and a percentage of fully Wheelchair Accessible Homes.

**1.17** In naming the various social housing supports within the Bill, including RAS, state the intent that Local Authorities, in recognising that people with disabilities have both additional needs and different identities, ensure that all social housing supports would be accessible and readily available to people with disabilities.

**1.18** In order to develop different living options with a support/personal assistance element, the Bill to direct Local Authorities to establish partnerships with the HSE to deliver a fuller range of housing choice – emergency, transitional, supported housing - where personal assistance is available to tenants within a shared and supported setting.

- Also the Minister to provide funding for tenancy support services to people with disabilities within social housing supports.

**1.19** The Minister to direct that the Assessment of Need by Local Authorities give rise to a Housing Services Delivery Plan for each individual with a disability with stated preferred housing options, scheduled progress updates, delivery time frames etc.

**1.20** The criteria in the Bill re rent arrears and eligibility for housing are too strict and should be withdrawn. Suffice that tenants do not have rent arrears at the time of application.

**Part 2** of this paper details the basis for the Irish Wheelchair Association Response to the Housing Bill '08

## **2. Irish Wheelchair Association Role in relation to Housing**

The IWA has always regarded the availability of accommodation of a suitable design and type, in a fitting location and with the required personal supports, as a basic right that directly supports a person with a disability to participate in and to contribute to the life of the community within which he/she lives. The Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities defined housing as “the base from which people participate in society, and can reflect as well as dictate their level of participation.”

The IWA has a number of separate and interrelated roles in regard to Housing issues. In addition to lobbying for increased provision and choice in appropriate housing supports, improved adaptation grants and increased availability of personal assistants, the IWA has directly provided some housing services itself. As a Voluntary Housing Association, IWA has accessed Capital Assistance Scheme Funding from the Department of the Environment which has supported the capital development of various different models of housing provision. The IWA has housing projects located in Galway, Limerick, Mayo, Kilkenny, Carlow and Dublin. These IWA housing projects provide both interim and long term independent living and supported community based housing with the availability of personal assistant support and independent living skills training as required.

In addition to organisational advocacy and direct housing provision the IWA also supports individual IWA members in pursuing their desired housing options through various other housing providers including Local Authorities and Voluntary Housing Associations.

The IWA has accumulated considerable experience as a housing provider and as an advocate in supporting people with disabilities access housing and related services.

### **2.1 Irish Wheelchair Association Recent Strategy Development**

During 2007 the IWA, in developing its Strategic Plan 2008 to 2011, consulted extensively with the IWA membership and with related service providers. The lack of availability of appropriate housing and related supports was a continuous theme voiced by the IWA membership throughout the consultation. Contributors to the Strategic Plan consultation made constant reference to the need for; supports to access and sustain tenancies, for personal assistants, for appropriate wheelchair accessible design, for different accommodation types to be interspersed within general needs housing, for transitional accommodation and independent living skills training etc etc.

Contributors to the IWA Strategy consultation also recognised the considerable work done by IWA as a housing provider in recommended that IWA and other

housing providers develop housing projects based on the IWA learning in developing and delivering different models of housing provision.

## **2.2 Housing requirements of People with Disabilities**

IWA advocates the availability of a number of housing types as required by people with disabilities. These housing types facilitate people to live with varying degrees of independence in settings of their choice and suitable to their needs.

People with disabilities need access to independent living within all existing housing types. They need to have the option to own or to rent; they need to have the option to deal with local authorities or voluntary housing organisations; they need access to the affordable or shared ownership schemes run by local authorities. In effect, people with disabilities want and need equal access as everyone else to the variety and complexity of different housing tenures and schemes available as outlined in appendix 1 of this paper.

IWA has identified the range of additional requirements and supports that people with disabilities can require in order to create equal access to the current system of housing in Ireland as:

- support to negotiate application forms
- support to communicate with housing providers
- support to access funding for personal assistants
- support to adapt existing properties
- support in achieving the best design of the living space to meet immediate and future needs

It has become clear to IWA through communicating with our members on the issue of housing that, in addition to gaining access to general needs housing, the following additional and new housing choices need to be developed to meet the requirements of some people with disabilities either on a long term or transitional basis:

- supported or sheltered housing
- emergency accommodation
- transition housing

### **Supported or Sheltered Housing**

This type of housing will provide either individual housing units close to each other or will facilitate people who wish to live within a group setting. At present there is very, very limited availability of this accommodation solution for people with physical disabilities who wish to live in proximity or within a group setting with maximum support on site.

A supported housing environment will provide the occupier with:

- on site personal assistant support as required
- on site personal and emotional support as required
- support in developing independent living skills as required
- wheelchair accessible design suited to needs
- communal areas with opportunities for socialising and other activities

### **Emergency Accommodation**

The need for emergency accommodation among people with disabilities is masked by the fact that significant numbers of people with disabilities are inappropriately placed in residential homes, nursing homes and hospital beds. In addition to this “institutional homelessness” people with disabilities experience the same need for emergency accommodation as the rest of the population. A crisis can arise in any life resulting in effective homelessness. Existing homeless services are generally not suited to the needs of a person with a disability and some people with disabilities find themselves on the streets, some are placed in nursing homes as the only available solution.

With the development of a stock of accessible and supported crisis accommodation units, people would not have to experience street life or residential care as a solution to their housing or life crisis. Appropriate crisis accommodation units could be interspersed within a transitional housing project and/or within services for homeless people.

### **Transition Housing**

Transitional housing can be a very useful step for people with disabilities on the road to independent living. The development of transitional housing projects where people would learn or relearn independent living skills, gain confidence and self reliance would significantly diminish reliance on expensive and in the long term unnecessary hospital and nursing home placements.

This type of housing project is short-term. It provides support in the form of:

- personal assistance
- training around household management and activities of daily living
- housing support to move towards independent living
- Occupational Therapy advice and assistance

Transitional Housing provides some people with disabilities the opportunity to move from the family home or from a residential home to a secure and supportive environment while they are planning and preparing for their move into the community.

### **2.3 Obstacles to Appropriate Housing**

It is quite clear that people with disabilities, in comparison with their non disabled peers, face additional challenges in finding suitable housing to meet their specific needs. IWA has identified these barriers which are in effect the inverse of the housing requirements of people with mobility impairment, as follows;

- barriers within the physical environment. There is lack of availability of wheelchair accessible housing in general and specifically within the rental and social housing pool. People with mobility Impairment generally require larger floor areas and an open plan which facilitates easy circulation and storage of various pieces of equipments. These space requirements need to be part of any design brief at the planning stage. This inclusive design approach is not common practice

- support barriers. Many people with disabilities require support to find the relevant housing contacts, complete application formalities, sustain a tenancy and also the support of personal assistants in their daily lives. Delivery on these requirements needs a coordinated multi agency approach between various state agencies and voluntary organisations. The failure to have a seamless service creates huge barrier for people with disabilities who wish to move out of their family or residential homes
- housing choice. The existing small number of supported housing projects has huge waiting lists. Independent living units provided by social housing providers can take years and years to become available often with no choice of location. As a consequence, there is no real availability of housing choice in terms of different housing and accommodation options for people with mobility impairment.
- application criteria. Different Local Authorities operate differently and signing on to a local Housing List can be problematic for people with disabilities in some Local Authority areas.

## **2.4 Demographics and Design Issues**

While the issue of accessibility to appropriate housing and to the built environment generally is of paramount importance to people with mobility impairment, it is also an issue of general concern. There is an increasing awareness among designers and policy makers of the need to plan for a built environment that can provide universal access to people of all ages and abilities with minimum need for adaptation as people progress through the various life stages. The developing concept of Universal Lifetime Design can accommodate the needs of many people with short term, some longer term and age related mobility impairment. But Universal Lifetime Design will not accommodate the design requirements of people with significant mobility impairment using large and often powered wheelchairs and sometimes having personal assistants working with them.

The 2006 Census recorded that 9.3% of the population have a disability. The National Disability Study 2006 recorded a slightly lower percentage of disability at 8.1%. This National Study introduced a threshold of severity of disability that would have excluded some people recorded within the Census 2006. The NDS also recorded 56% of all persons with a disability as having a mobility and dexterity impairment. This figure indicates that just over 4% of the population has varying levels of disability involving mobility impairment and consequently physical accessibility requirements in relation to the built environment, including housing.

People with mobility impairment have specific housing requirements that are additional to what is provided within general housing provision. It has been the experience of IWA that with a high unemployment rate among people with disabilities and unequal access to housing compared with non disabled peers, there is a disproportionate reliance amongst people with disabilities on; social housing provision, social welfare schemes that support private rental

accommodation and accommodation provided from alternative sources. These alternative sources would include prolonged residence within the family home, residence in hospitals and long stay centres such as nursing homes. According to Census 2006, 13% of people with disabilities are living in social housing compared with 7% of the general population.

Despite this situation where there is a high percentage of people with disabilities living in social housing and many people with disabilities inappropriately housed, for a variety of reasons, there has traditionally been a gap between the real housing need of people with disabilities and the recording of this need on local Authority Housing Lists. This situation presents an immediate challenge to housing providers and to disability representative organisations to find ways to determine the real housing needs of people with disabilities and to translate this need onto Housing Lists, into local Housing Plans and into design briefs.

## **2.5 Policy Context and Housing Legislation**

In existing Housing Legislation there is very little reference to the provision of housing services to meet the additional housing and support needs of people with disabilities. The 1988 Housing Act names the persons for whom a Housing Authority would make adequate and suitable housing provisions. People with disabilities come within several of the categories named in the 1988 Housing Act. There is no further guidance within Housing Legislation as to how the specific housing needs of people with disabilities be determined and delivered by a Housing Authority.

The 2005 Disability Act required the Department of the Environment to prepare a policy document, a Sectoral Plan. This Sectoral Plan policy document outlines the policy direction in relation to housing and makes a commitment to developing a Housing Strategy for people with disabilities,

“people with a disability often have fewer choices in terms of providing for their housing needs. Many require support either through adapting private houses .....or the provision of more specialised forms of accommodation ... the Sectoral Plan is directed at improving the quality of choice available.”

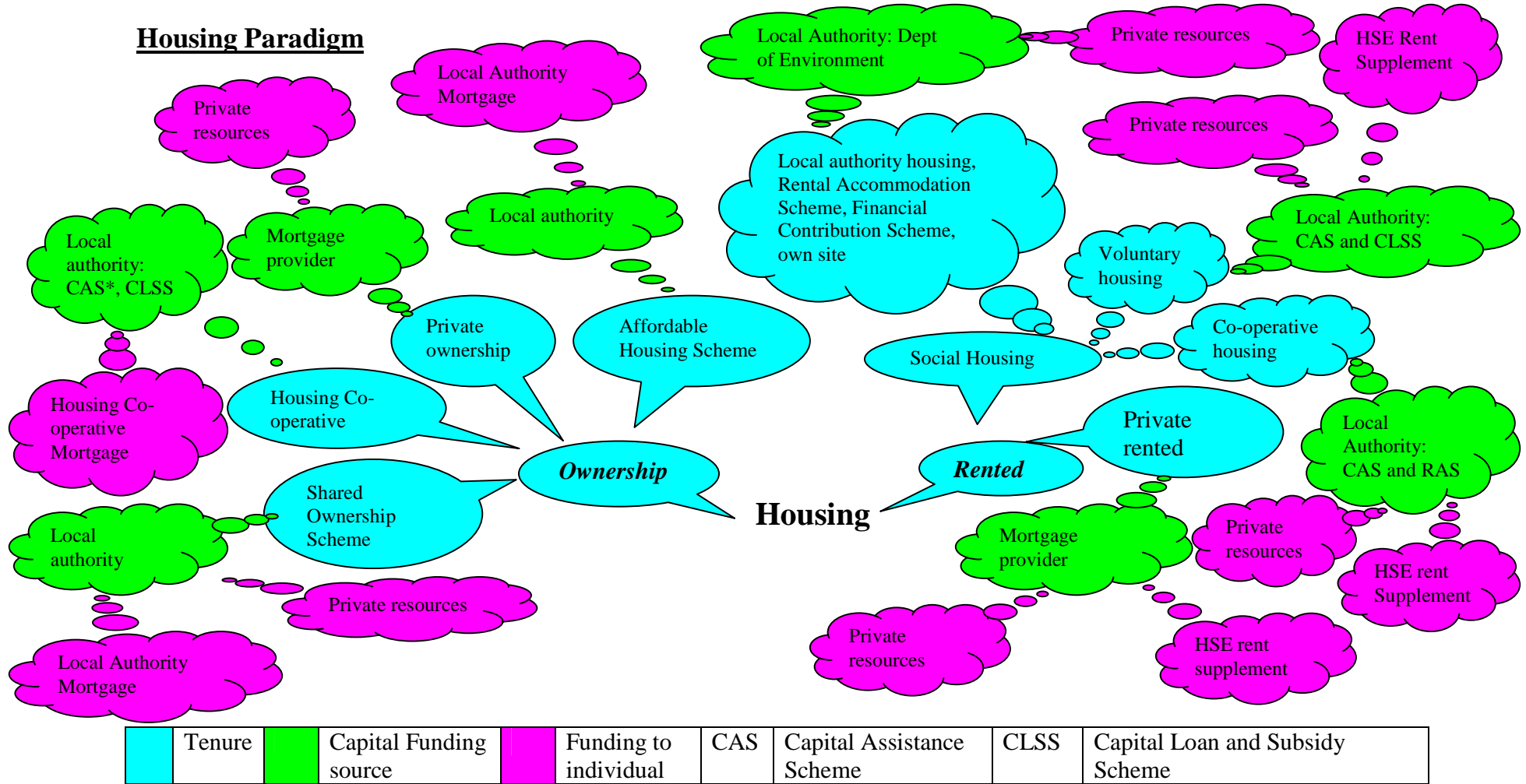
This policy commitment is repeated in T16 and in the Department of the Environment policy document, “Delivering Homes Sustaining Communities” where the importance of determining the real housing need of people with disabilities is clearly stated. The commitment to establishing work protocols between Housing Authorities and the Health Service Executive in relation to exchange of information and the revenue funding of support services is also made in this policy document. Equally the Universal or Lifetime design principle as it relates to housing is promoted in the accompanying design guidance document, “Best Practice Guidelines for Delivering Homes Sustaining Communities”.



These recent policy directives in relation to housing provision to people with disabilities are very welcome as is the consultative approach in the development of the Housing Strategy by the Department of the Environment. In the opinion of the IWA the above mentioned and relatively recent policy directives re housing and people with disabilities now require underpinning in Housing Legislation. This has been the approach for other groups with very specific housing requirements such as travellers and people who are homeless. The '98 Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act required Local Authorities to set out Traveller Accommodation Programmes. The 1988 Housing Act focused on defining Homelessness and required local authorities to carry out periodic assessments of need of homeless people and to respond accordingly. This IWA response to the Housing Bill 2008 recommends that the Housing Bill '08 take the same approach in regards to responding to the housing need of people with disabilities as recommended in Part 1 of this Paper.

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**Housing Paradigm**



- **Supports required by people with disabilities to access above general needs housing options are:** support to negotiate application forms; support to communicate with housing providers; support to access funding for personal assistants; support to adapt existing properties; support in achieving the best design of the living space to meet immediate and future needs.

- In addition to gaining access to general needs housing as above, **additional and new housing types** need to be developed to meet the requirements of some people with disabilities either on a long term or transitional basis. These housing types are: supported or sheltered housing, emergency accommodation and transition housing.