

British Council of Organisations  
of  
Disabled People

BCODP

DISABLED PEOPLE  
LOOKING AT HOUSING

BCODP's National Housing Conference - July 1987

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This publication is dedicated to all those disabled people who are living in inadequate housing conditions, in the hope that one day they may realise their dreams in homes of their own choosing.

## Background to the Conference.

In October 1986, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People held a weekend conference on Centres for Integrated/Independent Living. The suggestion was made that BCODP could hold further meetings in order to focus on specific issues (e.g. housing, transport, information-giving, etc.). These meetings could be both an opportunity for groups to share experience(s) and current practice, and provide opportunities to discuss what national and local policies may be required to assist the development of the Disability Movement's effectiveness on those issues.

Immediately following the CIL conference, BCODP member-organisations were contacted to sound out those interested in a conference/meeting to discuss housing issues, and to see who could contribute to the staging of such an event. From early-1987 onwards people from a number of member-organisations met to plan the one day conference held in the Borough of Milton Keynes Civic Centre on 4 July 1987.

## Format of the Conference

In order to provide all the conference participants with an early opportunity to contribute something of their experience and perspective on housing matters, the entire morning session was devoted to discussions in workshops of between 12-15 people. All the workshops were asked to discuss housing issues in whatever way they desired, although the following points could aid deliberation :

Drawing out the common ground to people's experiences.

Building up a picture of current practices and housing provision, and of what appeared to be the shortfalls.

Discussing the current involvements of disabled people in the planning and delivery of housing services, the ways whereby change could be worked towards, and importantly, what changes were desired.

Consideration of the ways to work with local authorities and their housing departments, and the roles of housing associations.

Discussing the role of disabled people in determining housing needs and how disabled people could move collectively towards changing housing policies.

The workshops were further asked to offer some recommendations for action on housing issues, including any role for BCODP.

By the opening of the afternoon session, details of the various workshop discussions had been summarised and a report-back was given to the conference as a whole. This was followed by four short presentations from some BCODP member-organisations currently active on housing issues, and was intended to provide an overview of the different work and approaches which organisations have taken.

Following these presentations the afternoon session was concluded by a general plenary session. This invited general discussion on any topic and the endorsement of recommendations put forward during the day.

# Summary of Workshop Discussions.

Discussion within the various workshops centred around the following:

## 1. Dissatisfaction with current housing provision.

### a) Practical Concerns.

- A chronic housing shortage has increased the cost of private dwellings. Disabled people in particular are clustered in the low-income bracket.
- There is both a great scarcity of appropriate accommodation, and an under-utilisation of what does exist - i.e. most allocation and transfer policies are inappropriate and inadequate.
- There is a lack of local resources to build or maintain the general housing stock.
- There is a lack of funding for house adaptations, and a generally extremely slow process in them being carried out.
- Insufficient information is available for both planners and users of services, as to the requirements of disabled people.
- Many general access problems persist in and around housing developments. There is still little genuinely integrated housing being constructed - i.e. where residents can move freely around the external environment, visit neighbours, etc.

### b) Legislative Concerns

- Current housing design and planning legislation is outdated and inappropriate, as are most Codes of Practice.
- There exist few opportunities for disabled people themselves to be centrally involved in changing or influencing housing/planning legislation.
- Current legislation discriminates against disabled people, and restricts both mobility and choice. This is a consequence of disabled people's needs being assigned a low priority.

### c) Philosophical Concerns

- There prevails an outdated image of disability - the medical model.
- Established agencies, in particular local authorities, are very resistant to change. Disabled people (as the users of services) are still excluded from the planning and provision of many community services.
- What is conferred by the term "special" when referring to "special needs housing"? Rather than be regarded as a completely separate group, disabled people would welcome the design of dwellings for use by everyone.
- A suitable dwelling is an aid to an independent life, and not an end in itself.
- Disabled people have the right to challenge what does not meet their requirements.

## 2. The Implications for Care Support.

- (a) A provision for care support services needs to be included in the whole process of housing design and provision.
- (b) Care support services must be according to individual need, and not merely determined by the location of a dwelling or the service.
- (c) An allowance should be made within the Housing Design Brief to give consideration to a use of careworkers.
- d) One-bed units need to be viewed with reservation.

## 3. Suggestions and Recommendations.

See the final section of this report.

# Report of the Presentations Given

## 1. Hampshire Centre for Independent Living (HCIL)

HCIL's presentation was given by Phil Mason, a member of the organisation's Housing & Care Programme.

Housing for disabled people is an "issue" because inadequate housing is one of the means whereby disabled people are isolated from mainstream society. Any approach on housing matters, however, needs to be within the broad context of pressing for equal opportunities for disabled people in all areas of life.

HCIL's activities fall into two areas - Practical and Political

### 1. Practical

- (a) Supporting individuals in their attempts to acquire a dwelling via :
  - i) appeals to, and meetings with, housing departments: housing associations: district councillors: MPs: Management Committees.
  - ii) consideration of the open market, either to buy or to rent: financial and funding implications physical alterations needed.
- (b) Continuing to provide advice, information and peer support services after an individual has acquired a dwelling in particular this is to help people develop strategies to live in the community and to see a new home as a means to a new life and not an end in itself.
- (c) The completion and dissemination of lessons learned and experiences gained via formal documents such as 'Sourcebook on Independent Living' and 'One Step On' .

### 2. Political

In general this has involved attempts to persuade housing agencies to be both more positive and flexible in response to disabled people's aspirations of having a home of their own. This has included :

- (a) approaching housing associations for support to exceed expenditure guidelines set by the Housing Corporation.
- (b) approaching local charities to buy homes and subsequently let them
- (c) discussions with Social Services department for it to take a more "enabling" role to support people living independently.
- (d) work with a sub-committee of the Hampshire Chief Housing Officers Committee and the production of a publication on local housing provision. This recommended (amongst other things) improved access and design guidelines; a greater flexibility for people leaving residential care; and the removal of administrative barriers in having the housing stock managed by many separate borough authorities.

An overview of housing provision in the region would suggest little real improvement to the quality of useable housing. The region is furthermore one of very high house prices with little to offer low-income groups. Plans are still encountered -and opposed! -for small segregated living developments.

A new initiative to bring together all county-based interested in housing is being scheduled for this autumn.

## 2. Derbyshire Centre for Integrated Living (DCIL)

DCIL's presentation was given by Paula Elliot, the organisations Housing Research and Development Officer.

DCIL occupies a somewhat unique place in the country at present, in being the only full-time funded CIL. It is the fruit of a co-ordinated approach to disability issues between the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People and Derbyshire County Council.

Rather than take a compartmentalised view of peoples lives and needs DCIL looks at disability as a single, uncomplicated but multi-faceted issue. It furthermore seeks to overcome traditional perceptions of disabled people as being no more than passive recipients of services. The CIL employs six Research and Development Officers to develop work on matters of transport, housing, technical aids, counselling, benefits, and employment, and there is an information service for people to make use of. There are also Community Link Workers based in District Council offices, whose responsibility is to promote a truly integrated approach to services, plus supporting disabled people in their contacts with service providers and involvement in local planning initiatives.

As with other posts within DCIL, the Housing Officer has a responsibility not least to promote 'housing' within the organisation, and as an interest to the other workers. The post's wide brief covers:

- providing information about local authority housing departments and housing associations.
- promoting owner-occupation as a realistic tenure option e.g. for people leaving long term institutional care.
- in liaison with DCIL's information service workers provide all round housing advice.
- presenting positive images of disability and disabled people to local authority officers groups.
- training disabled people to read architects plans, scale drawings, and generally feed experience into the planning procedure system.
- work with a Housing Consumers group e.g. researching the numbers of new and established owner occupiers.
- the exploration of setting up a Housing Register to avoid adapted properties remaining unlet.

Long term strategy includes. investigating self build schemes; becoming more involved in planning and design, and in developing "good practice" guidelines; helping local authority personnel understand the wider implications of DCIL's approach to disability, as compared to their own

departments fragmented approach -e.g. social workers are often uncertain about housing allocation policies, and housing managers stick rigidly to medical concepts of disability.

### 3. Islington Disablement Association (IDA)

This presentation was given by Francis Hasler, Co-ordinator of IDA.

Islington is an inner city Borough with very high property costs and a predominantly old housing stock. 60% of its residents are in council property. The borough has a large housing programme, including extensive rehabilitation of older estates and street properties, and new build on in-fill sites.

In 1983 Islington council adopted a policy of designing 75% of all new build property to "mobility" standard, and 25% to "wheelchair" standard. This was in recognition that previous design targets had not been met and that there was now a shortfall of suitable property.

Monitoring this and other housing policies is the Housing for Disabled Group (HDPG), of which IDA plays a central role. The HDPG originally began life as a 'technical group' bringing together architects, surveyors, occupational therapists, housing and social services officers, and service users. It took on the task of revising the borough's Design Brief in order to incorporate adequate access details which would promote independent living by disabled tenants. It also regularly revises the brief as lessons are learned and new technology becomes available.

All housing designs must be submitted to the HDPG which meets about every six weeks. Designs come in three stages (1) an initial brief on: the density of units desired, the size of units, site suitability, and local facilities, (2) an initial design: considering drawings showing internal layouts, and (3) a detailed design: showing much more detailed design of kitchens, bathrooms, storage spaces, play areas etc.

As the brief becomes better known fewer questions on basic layout need to be asked, however the group is still encountering poor designs e.g. for wc facilities or family size units, where there has seemed little thought given to how disabled people may actually use the dwellings.

The HDPG is part of the consultative process of the borough's Housing Committee, as are council tenants themselves. A design rejected by the HDPG or other tenants is referred back to the Committee, but occasionally compromises have to be reached -e.g. agreeing to "pass" plans for a homeless persons hostel which did not include provision for a lift. This was in order that the whole design package it was a single part of, would be acceptable to the Department of the Environment and eligible for funding.

In its work on other housing policy the HDPG has been giving attention to the borough's allocation-policy, in particular to some unhelpful consequences of Islington decentralising its housing services to Neighbourhood Offices, and thereby losing some centrally-based experience. The council has since decided to re-centralise its allocation system for disabled people, and the HDPG has looked at a system which tries to make more fair the allocation of a scarce resource, namely devising a checklist of "need".

The group has also considered the role of estate managers in carrying out minor adaptations, for example to avoid minor works being referred to Occupational Therapists (who have huge waiting lists). Guidelines for estate managers have now been produced.

In its ongoing work the HDPG wants to be able to :

- (a) include work with local housing associations within its jurisdiction.
- (b) continue the work begun on allocations and decentralisation.
- (c) increase its training element on housing issues (for local authority officers and service users) both on the technical aspects of design and on awareness about disability.
- (d) lobby the DOE on funding matters -councils are urged to build more "mobility" and "wheelchair" standard housing but are not allowed to spend the necessary money to do so.

The group has three user-representatives, all of whom are disabled. Within the group meetings their viewpoint is usually supported by the occupational therapist members; other support outside of the meeting is vital in view of the commitment necessary to take part in lengthy and sometimes difficult consultative procedures.

The value of the group is however beginning to show, both in the satisfaction of tenants moving onto new estates, and in Islington now becoming the foremost borough in London for the number of "wheelchair" and "mobility" standard dwellings. \*

\* Source: Spastics Society survey.

#### 4. Greenwich Association of Disabled People (GAD)

This presentation was given by Rachel Hurst, the Chairperson of GAD.

GAD's involvement on housing issues has grown slowly from some initial study days and workshops, to the present day where all planning applications in the borough pass through GAD for comment, and where it now has its own funded Housing Worker.

The initial workshops brought together interested parties in the borough - the housing department, housing associations, occupational therapists, members of GAD, etc. Following a consciousness-raising process over the space of nine months to a year, GAD is now witnessing the fruit of very positive responses by housing agencies. For example in collaboration with one local housing association a ten unit development has recently been completed, where all the units have been built to "wheelchair" standard (in the first instance four units will be let to disabled tenants, and one used for accommodating careworkers). It is anticipated that another such scheme will commence in the near-future, though discussion continues as to the suitability of building dwellings with only one bedroom.

GAD pursues a 'macro' approach to housing issues i.e. to regard housing provision as one part of the built environment, and as needing to be flexible to suit various requirements of different users or residents. It has weekly meetings with the Planning Department. All planning applications pass through GAD's Access Committee, which itself brings together volunteer workers with the Borough's Access Officer.

GAD's Housing Officer post is funded via the borough's Housing Department.

### Report of the Plenary Session.

The points recorded below are those which have not already been mentioned in this report, as many of the main issues were consistently echoed throughout the days proceedings.

The major theme which emerged from the plenary session was the importance of developing BCODPs policy on housing issues. It was acknowledged that such a policy could only arise from wide consultation and agreement of BCODP members, but that the day's events and discussions provided a framework for this. It would also be important to draw out all the issues involved e.g.-

- should all housing be accessible?
- what sorts of tenure?
- the requirements of people from many backgrounds e.g. people with sensory impairments.
- the need to challenge space standards (i.e. concerning dwellings) as constraints of finance.

A second theme was the problem of funds for BCODP, which severely restricts its activities. DHSS funding had been cut and currently only one worker was in post to service the entire organisation. There was a general feeling that BCODP needs to increase its national profile in order to be in a stronger position to compete for funds, but it was recognised that BCODP is up against some very established and powerful interest groups.

It was hoped that promoting a report of this conference would serve both to win realistic funds for BCODPs work, and a means of contacting a wider number of disabled people. Although it is often difficult getting through to individual disabled people, it was noted that ways were now being researched by the National Information Forum, to help information reach individuals more effectively.

In general the value of coming together, as a working group of disabled people working out their own solutions to their housing problems, was consistently stressed. As one speaker remarked, the Movements assets should not be lost sight of, in that disabled peoples strength lies in their direct involvement. Priority should be given to discussing and producing policy, testing positions, and organising around this, in order for disabled people to be truly involved in housing issues.

## Recommendations and Suggestions

It was unanimously felt that BCODP should have a national housing policy which :

- 1) Supports and promotes disabled people being involved in design, planning and funding decisions, and that this is in liaison with other bodies at all levels, locally and nationally.
- 2) Makes recommendations to changes in current housing and design legislation, and endorses a statutory right to consultation on housing matters.
- 3) Recommends changes to current systems of lettings and allocations.
- 4) Promotes 'the social model of disability' and, with regard to housing, challenges the existing notions of 'special needs' in favour of a comprehensive approach to general housing which could cater for various needs.
- 5) Campaigns for information to be more widely available regarding all housing opportunities

BCODP should furthermore :

- i) Increase its liaison with housing bodies and agencies e.g. local authorities, housing associations, planners, architects, builders etc.
- ii) Be itself involved at a national level in planning design, and funding decisions and lobby for the appropriate changes in legislation concerning these issues.
- iii) It should pressurise local and national government to fulfill their statutory duties and obligations.
- iv) Consider organising a National Housing campaign (possibly to tie in with existing campaigns) in order to set standards at grass roots level, and further strengthen the overall disability movement.
- v) Consider forming its own housing association.
- vi) Support disabled people's involvement in housing issues.

Disabled People's Organisations themselves should:

- 1) Press locally for involvement in the design and planning of housing services.
- 2) Press local authorities to fulfill statutory obligations.

- 3) Collectively work together to change the existing image of disability and influence housing agencies. This would include stimulating the formation of organisations of disabled people where they currently do not exist.
- 4) Consider forming their own housing co-ops and housing associations.
- 5) Develop and promote 'equal opportunities' initiatives.
- 6) Offer support to individuals challenging 'the establishment and wishing to live in suitable housing of their own choice.

Local Authorities and other Housing Agencies should :

- 1) Involve and consult disabled people and their organisations in the decision-making processes concerning housing, planning, design, rehabilitation, adaptations and financing.
- 2) Develop a comprehensive approach to housing which encompasses necessary issues such as care services, access, technical aids etc. This could be best done by these agencies working alongside CILs and other disabled people's organisations.
- 3) Establish procedures to monitor housing policies and services in consultation with disabled people.
- 4) Establish equal opportunities policies and officers to support these.
- 5) Change lettings and allocations procedures in consultation with disabled people, in order to make housing stock a more flexible community asset.
- 6) Provide adequate information on what housing is, or could be, available.
- 7) Work towards the establishment of a national housing register of accessible property nationwide, and a national exchange scheme for adapted housing.
- 8) All housing should be to "wheelchair" standard - access could then be a norm to ordinary houses in ordinary streets.

## Organisations attending BCODP Housing Conference.

Disabled Drivers Association.

Glasgow Forum on Disability.

Milton Keynes Council of Disabled People.

Spinal Injuries Association.

Notts Coalition of Disabled People

Living Options Project

Islington Disablement Association.

Harringay Disablement Association.

Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation

Shaftesbury Society.

Socialist Disability Action Group.

LINK

Greenwich Association of the Disabled People

Derbyshire CIL.

Hampshire CIL

Bristol CIL

Greater London Association of the Disabled

British Council of Organisations of Disabled People.

Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People

Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People