

Disability and Dependency: origins and futures of 'special needs' housing for disabled people

JOHN STEWART*, JENNIFER HARRIS† & BOB SAPEY†

**Department of Applied Social Science, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YL, and †University of Central Lancashire, UK*

ABSTRACT *In this paper we analyse the provision of housing for disabled people in both its historical and ideological contexts. While the recent extension of part M of the Building Regulations to dwellings by the government represents a significant advance towards the inclusion of disabled people, we argue that the shift in funding of public housing from a 'bricks and mortar' subsidy to Housing Benefit potentially creates greater dependency. This amounts to a policy contradiction in which the government is punishing disabled people for being dependent whilst simultaneously being the cause of their dependency. If this issue is not addressed disabled people will continue to remain excluded, albeit within accessible dwellings.*

Introduction

The existing wheelchair housing in this country derives from an interpretation of Alf Morris' private member's Bill [Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act, 1970, sec. 3 (1)]. However, the understanding of disability that informed both this Act and particularly its interpretation by local housing authorities is one that fails to understand fully the causal relationship between impairment and social need. The dominant view of disability is one of individualised social limitations which result for each person if they have a physical, intellectual or sensory impairments. This 'imperfection' is then taken as being the cause of other disadvantages—the disability—such as the inability to access ordinary family housing. The individual model of disability constructs cause as residing with the 'impaired' person and it has dominated the thinking of almost all modernist social policy, whether specifically intended for disabled people or affecting them incidentally.

Since the late 1960s growing numbers of disabled activists have challenged the expectation that they should be regarded as 'special' and that they should have their needs provided for separately from 'non-disabled' people. An alternative analysis of disability—the social model—has been developed to pursue a very different set of objectives (Oliver, 1983, 1990). The social model of disability rejects any direct and

necessary causal relationship between impairment and disability, instead arguing that the disadvantages and inequalities faced by people with physical impairments result from modes of social organisation which exclude such people.

Employing the social model of disability in analysing contemporary British housing policy we would argue that the inability to access a dwelling in a wheelchair is not caused by the injury a person sustained which made them unable to walk, but by the fact that architects have consistently failed to design dwellings which are accessible to everybody. The result is the systematic exclusion of disabled people or people with impairments. The exclusion of disabled people is obvious in the fields of housing and community care where the modernist response to 'special' needs has been the building of large institutions. Admission to the institution takes place at a point in time when care professionals determine that disabled people are so severely 'abnormal' that they need to be segregated—in the name of care, ostensibly for their own benefit. In contrast, the social model of disability demands the recognition of a right to independent living and 'independence' does not just mean providing a built environment or equipment which would enable individuals to function, but provision of the same range of choices that non-disabled people have, particularly in relation to housing.

Indeed, housing has been a central concern of the disabled people's movement in Britain, both in terms of policy and action. In the mid-1980s the Derbyshire Coalition of Disabled People identified it as one of seven needs that form a framework for independent living: 'information, counselling, housing, technical aids and adaptations, personal assistance, transport and physical assistance' (cited in Barnes, 1991, p. 135), while a decade earlier conveniently situated and accessible housing was also central to the *Fundamental Principles of Disability* that were put forward by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (Oliver, 1996, pp. 21–28). Furthermore, since the 1970s, disabled people have been involved in direct action to provide alternative forms of housing that would enable independent living. The most direct of these is probably the 'collective house' approach which first appeared in Denmark (Oliver, 1983, pp. 91–92). This was closely followed by the Grove Road scheme in the UK which demonstrated that when disabled people had appropriate housing they were able to live with significantly less direct physical assistance than when they were in residential care (Davis, 1981).

The concept of independent living is not simply a spatial one, but is also concerned with changing the power relationships between the helped and helper in situations of dependency (Finkelstein, 1980) so that disabled people are in control of how, when, where and by whom the tasks of personal assistance are undertaken. The social model of disability calls for a paradigm shift in the way we all think about ourselves and our conception of normality. We analyse this shift through an examination of the social policy development within which wheelchair housing arose, and by exploring current policies and the political context of its provision. In particular we examine the interaction of housing policy and benefit dependency which we would argue has a stronger causal relationship to disablement than does impairment.

The Origins of Special Needs Housing

The politicians who make policy, assailed from all sides by the well-meaning and the self-serving, run with various agendas, but in the field of health and welfare the individual model of disability has been hegemonic. In articulating their understanding of disability, we can sense the tension of politicians who are feeling their way towards something rather different, whilst remaining caged by the individual model. In the only and brief reference to the housing problems of disabled people during the second reading debate on the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill, Alf Morris, its sponsor, mentioned the need for two-roomed bungalows and transfers to more suitable property:

There are tens of thousands of families in this country who, because of the severe disability of the man or the wife, seek transfers from one council to another, or more usually, from a council flat to a council house. (The new law) suggests that local authorities should adapt the homes of the disabled in every possible case.... In the City of Manchester, disabled families are sometimes pre-selected for houses that are in the process of being built so that the houses can be adapted to meet their needs. (House of Commons Debates, 1969, cols 1859–60)

In Standing Committee debate, Reg Freeson the Joint Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Housing and Local government, claimed that:

It is not enough for local authorities to cater for general housing needs without looking at the detailed make-up of those needs. (In order to do that, local housing officers) should not wait for the needs to be brought to their notice, but should find them out. (House of Commons Debates, Standing Committee C, 1970, col 160)

As there was already sufficient legislation, guidance and encouragement according to Freeson, he wondered why it had not already happened. It is clear from his remarks in Committee that he believed the ‘special housing needs’ of disabled people should be considered by local housing authorities when making their plans for new building or renovation, and, as the housing departments had proved deficient in that respect, Morris’ Bill needed a government proposed amendment to make them. The government amendment meant that local housing authorities had to ‘distinguish any houses which the authority propose to provide which make special provision for the needs of (chronically sick or disabled persons)’ [as it became in section 3(1) of the Act]. That would mean the Ministry would thence be able to assess the extent to which each local housing authority was estimating need and making provisions (House of Commons Debates, Standing Committee C, 1970, cols 166–170).

Freeson commends ‘The Disabled’ section of the Cullingworth Report, [1] which points out the marginally increased expense of providing some adapted dwellings within a general needs scheme at design stage (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1969, paras 114–116). It was shortly after this time that

housing for disabled people hardened into the provision of either customised wheelchair dwellings or ‘adapted property’, soon to be called ‘mobility housing’.

What was innovative and radical at that time therefore were the ideas of identifying tenants at a construction stage and of being pro-active in identifying individual need. However, the approach actually adopted was one of viewing the needs of disabled people as ‘special’, hence to be met by separate provision, in this case particular dwellings which would be built to a different standard from dwellings for non-disabled people. The alternative approach of course, would have been to build all homes to an accessible standard.

When Labour returned to office in 1974, Morris was made minister with special responsibility for disabled people. Through Morris’ pressure, a Department of the Environment circular of 1974 asserted that there was an urgent need for housing authorities, and housing associations, to do much more for people who were ‘physically handicapped’ (Department of the Environment, 1974). The circular referred directly to the Office of Population Censuses and Survey’s report into the circumstances of disabled people, arguing that the main new-building need was for one or two bedroomed accommodation. However, the circular was sensitive enough about the range of need to suggest that three concurrent approaches were appropriate: upgrading existing houses to a standard suitable for the disabled occupant; ordinary housing with level access designed to a space and amenity standard suitable for disabled people (which became ‘mobility housing’); and new wheelchair housing.

Indeed, the OPCS survey to which the circular had referred found that a quarter of a million adult disabled people were ‘totally dependent on wheelchairs’. Disabled people were living in all tenures and many expressed a wish to move into more suitable accommodation. About one in four of ‘impaired persons’ wanted to move—proportionately more council tenants were potential movers—and 38% of them had applied for council re-housing. However, one in four of these potential movers had refused the re-housing offered. The main reason given for wanting to move in the first place was to live in accommodation without stairs and the main reason for refusing an offer was, ‘stairs’ (Buckle, 1971, section 17). A picture emerges of disabled people turning to their local housing authority for assistance and of its inability, at that time, to meet expressed need. The parliamentary debates clearly show that the politicians saw local housing authorities as the providers of first resort in this area of need. Somehow they had to be made to provide ‘appropriate’ dwellings.

It is unclear whether DoE circular 74/74 was issued in response to, or in some sense anticipated a United Nations Resolution on Adaptable Housing of the same year, 1974, which called for the construction of dwellings which could be adapted, that is, were accessible and permitted ‘modifications at low cost for the benefit of disabled persons in wheelchairs’. [2] The point is that while the UN Resolution clearly gives a common basis for the development of adaptable dwellings, circular 74/74 favoured the individualised dependency model of the wheelchair dwellings. At this time, however, very few wheelchair dwellings were actually built and when the programme did take-off, the politically motivated changes in housing policy after 1979 led to an immediate decline (see Fig. 1).

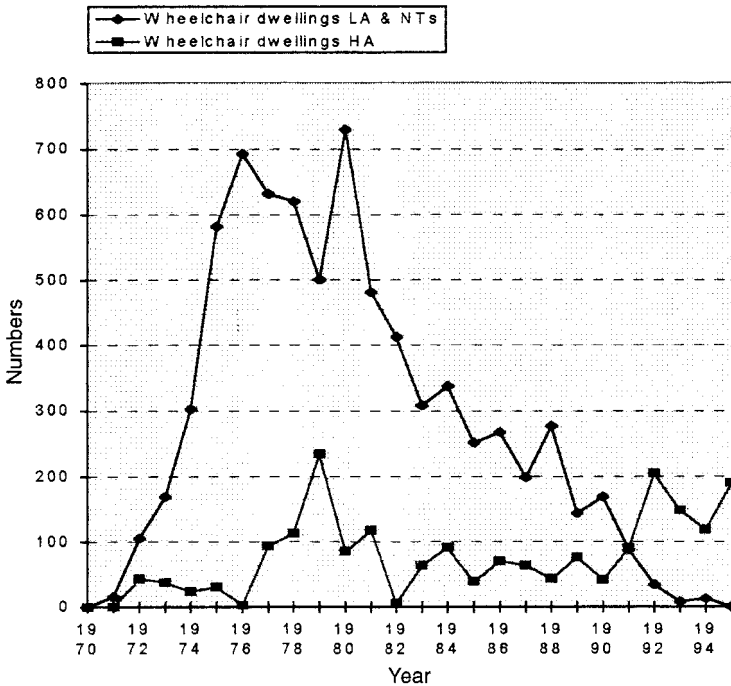


FIG. 1. Completion of wheelchair dwellings in England, 1970–95. (Source: *Housing Construction Statistics* (DoE) 1970–1995).

Dilemmas Within the ‘Special Needs’ Approach

Having set out with a predetermined definition of ‘special needs’ housing provision for disabled people in general and wheelchair users in particular, planners of the time were faced with the ‘dilemma’ of under-use. Selwyn Goldsmith, superintending architect of the Housing Development Directorate of the Department of the Environment, claimed that housing departments were experiencing difficulties in finding suitable tenants, concluding that the real need was for more mobility housing as referred to in Circular 74/74 (c.f. Topliss & Gould, 1981, p. 123). The point has some force as even before the push for wheelchair housing, local directors of housing had been complaining that they found difficulty in letting such dwellings to ‘appropriate’ tenants (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1969, para. 115). [3] However, Circular 74/74, as we have noted, advised local housing authorities to follow a range of approaches based on the variety of need expressed in Buckle. We note Goldsmith’s criticism with some scepticism, for being the author of the relevant Housing Development Directorate documents, he was instrumental in the field of housing for disabled people in more ways than one, and was therefore in a position to change it (Goldsmith, 1974, 1975).

The under-occupancy of wheelchair housing by wheelchair users has also produced a problem for housing associations as the Housing Corporation’s CORE data on new allocations of tenancies for 1996 reveals. It also shows that there is a wide discrepancy between regions. Merseyside performed worst with just 11% of

wheelchair housing being allocated to a family with a member who used a wheelchair, whilst the highest region was London, still with only 35%. In the same year, some 55% of wheelchair user households who became tenants were allocated non-wheelchair standard properties. [4]

There are several explanations for this. First, there has been a tendency for local authorities to build a majority of wheelchair dwellings as single bedroomed homes, whereas the demand from households with a disabled member has been for two or three bedroomed properties (Morris, 1988). We argue that the individual model of disability led planners to regard disabled people as sexless and without families and that, as the development of 'special housing' was conceived as an alternative to residential care, the emphasis should be on the provision of one-person dwellings reflecting the single lifestyle of many residents in these homes. Hence, the wheelchair housing which the planners and architects built became difficult-to-let, to wheelchair users that is, because (as now), wheelchair users lived in a variety of household types.

Secondly, there has been a tendency, certainly in the early years of such building, to create mini-institutions by building wheelchair dwellings on the same site as support services, which were often located in yet another 'special' facility such as a day centre for disabled people (Oliver, 1983). Indeed, in Sweden where this model of housing was pioneered, some commentators regard it as creating 'house arrest' because of the extent to which housing and care authorities have tried to retain control of their provision (Ratzka, 1991).

Thirdly, collaboration and co-operation between housing and social services authorities over the provision of housing for a range of people has developed very slowly (Arnold *et al.*, 1993). In 1992 RADAR reported that there were, for example, virtually no procedures in place within housing authorities to identify disabled people who needed housing and most relied on social services, who did not systematically assess housing need (RADAR, 1992). On-going developments at a strategic level are reviewed by Lund and Foord, who do, however, stress that 'there is no real substitute for building on the foundation stones of detailed assessments of individual need compiled in dialogue with consumers' (Lund & Foord, 1997, p. 23). Just as in the past, it is still a fair summary and generalisation of these points that wheelchair dwellings do not remain unlet; non-wheelchair users rent them.

Estimating Needs

An inherent problem within the 'special needs' model of housing provision is how best to estimate need. As we have seen there are many reasons for under-occupancy which would need to be considered in such an estimation, but herein lies a paradox. On the one hand, the rejection of specialist housing would lead to the conclusion that very little is needed and that, perhaps, the free market should be allowed to operate while on the other, it suggests that many more properties than are actually required for occupancy should be built in order to ensure adequate choice. The wide range in the various attempts to estimate the need for wheelchair dwellings reflect this paradox. Morris (1988) quoted the Department of the Environment as estimat-

ing the need in the late 1970s to be for 61,420 dwellings; Ounsted (1987) crudely estimated the need at about 150,000 dwellings; the Housing Corporation (1991), noting that the 1986 Disability Surveys revealed some 360,000 wheelchair users in England and Wales and that this was 330,000 greater than the number of social sector wheelchair dwellings, suggested that there was 'a notable requirement for new purpose built wheelchair accommodation'; finally, McCafferty (1995) claimed that the shortfall in England was actually only 12,988 dwellings. However, while it is apparent that the other figures are all substantially higher than McCafferty's, it is that figure which has government support (House of Lords Debates, 1995, Written Answers cols. 35–36). A further significance of McCafferty's report is the manner in which its method, findings and discussion have been uncritically absorbed into the debate (Lund & Foord, 1997, p. 14); and its continued recommendation by the Departments of Health and Environment (1997) to social services, housing and health authorities.

Although it is not possible to make use of either the Housing Corporation's or Ounsted's figures, in our research we have made an attempt to update the other two. The first is relatively straight forward, since, by examining increases in housing construction and of numbers of wheelchair users, the Department of Environment estimates rise to 95,000 (Harris *et al.*, 1997). McCafferty's estimate, however, has particular methodological errors, the effect of which is to drastically reduce the estimate of need (Stewart *et al.*, 1998). Using the data from this study without the mathematical errors, we have calculated that he should have reported the level of need as 40,658 dwellings, but given his reliance on particularly individualistic notions of need, this is still likely to be a gross underestimate. McCafferty's report is also the only one to overtly suggest that specialist dwellings are not what is needed, although no attempt is made to suggest an alternative beyond that of respecting the choice of the individual within a free market.

If there was a difficulty in letting wheelchair housing, and if the experts in the Ministry favoured mobility housing and there was a UN Recommendation supporting adaptable housing—all of which seems to point down the road to Lifetime Homes [5]—why has the building of wheelchair housing been pursued for so long? One could claim that as a 'policy' its pursuit has been rather half-hearted with only 9381 built, or 29,932 adapted and built since 1970, depending on whether one uses Housing and Construction Statistics or the HIP1 returns (Harris *et al.*, 1997, Table 1, p. 4). [6] Those figures compare with 39,451 or 57,268 'other dwellings for disabled people' in 1995 which are not wheelchair housing (again, depending on which set of figures one uses).

The disparity between the Housing Construction figures and the local housing authorities' HIP1 returns indicates the volume of adaptation which must have been taking place. Local housing authorities seem to have been convinced that the policy of building 'special needs' homes led to an inefficient use of resources. Adaptation was one thing, building for disabled people was quite another. Housing managers believed that public rented housing for general needs ought to have been available and adapted or adaptable for wheelchair users. However, given the enslavement of public sector architects and planners to modernist building, their maisonettes, point

blocks, slab block complexes in ziggurats hardly provided an accessible built environment for wheelchair users.

The modification of mobility standards in 1975 to include two-storey housing meant that disabled people would be able to use a wider range of council properties when such dwellings came on stream. The mystery is why, if this was so clear to Goldsmith even by 1974, the design of wheelchair housing was not modified to make it more attractive to the public landlords. It is only quite recently that consultations between service user groups and the government have actually led to concrete changes in building standards. On 9 March 1998 Construction Minister, Nick Raynsford, announced the government's intention to lay amendment regulations before parliament which would require the building of private dwellings to accessible (though not necessarily adaptability) standards. Raynsford stated that the change in building regulations would 'ensure better access to new domestic dwellings. This is, therefore, a key obligation for this government, which is committed to social inclusion' (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998). To answer our own question, the primary reason why it has taken so long to move from specific 'special needs' provision to Lifetime Homes has been 18 years of socially divisive and exclusionary policies pursued by Conservative administrations.

Shifting Responsibilities in Public Sector Building

Identifying the promotion of individual home ownership and the erosion of local authority involvement in social renting as major objectives of the recent Conservative administrations (Malpass, 1996), provides the policy context for our discussion on the problems of need and demand for wheelchair and other housing for disabled people. First, let us look at the achievement of those objectives by charting the experience of decline in the contribution made by public housing over the years of Thatcherism.

Examining Figure 1, it would be too easy to conclude that from 1981 onwards the building of specific wheelchair dwellings declined as an unequivocal matter of policy. The economic recession of the early 1980s saw a collapse in private housing market activity with new building at a 25-year low. It would therefore be the absence of a consequent decline in the public sector which would have been inexplicable. However, while the year-on-year decline in building wheelchair houses proceeded steadily, the private market recovered in 1985 going on to build 83% of the 179,000 annual total of all houses by the start of the next decade (DoE, 1991, fig. 67, p. 85). The Conservative government extolled this advance in what is still the current housing white paper (DoE, 1995, pp. 13 and 28).

There has been a further decline in public sector building activity in England from the 14,702 completed houses in 1989 at the end of the last boom, to a nugatory 817 by 1995 (Wilcox, 1996, Table 18b, p. 100). Behind that story of decline in the contribution which the public sector has made to social rented house building is the massive change in type of housing which the sector has built. The decline is associated with a change in policy emphasis towards providing social rented housing for people with 'special needs'. The proportion of public sector

dwellings completed each year which were identified as 'special needs' housing increased during the 1980s from a fifth to a third of the declining number of completions. So although the segment of public sector house-building which we are considering in this article was clearly in decline, dwellings for disabled people nevertheless represented an ever larger proportion of the public sector houses actually built.

In addition, housing associations now have the major house building rôle in the social rented sector as the steady rise in their completions in England from 10,651 in 1989 to 31,068 by 1995 testifies (Wilcox, 1996, p. 100). Official housing statistics now show housing association figures not with public sector dwellings, but with the private sector which is misleading in the sense that the vast majority of housing association houses are for rent with a subsidy, whereas the private sector builds for owner occupation. Counting together the public sector and housing association completions to consolidate the contribution to social rented housing, the above data shows that the proportion of housing association completions towards the social rented sector rose from 42 to 97% between 1989 and 1995. A significant increase in housing association stock between 1989 and 1995 has also come from the transfer to them (in the main) of some 185,000 dwellings from 41 local housing authorities, most of which were in the shire counties (DoE, 1995, p. 28). Some authorities have thus transferred all their stock. Hence, as the burden of building social rented housing now falls to housing associations and as the total stock managed by the housing associations increases, this is reflected in both the building and managing of an increasing number of wheelchair dwellings and other housing for disabled people.

Financing: grants and social security

Our analysis of housing construction and HIP data shows that nearly all dwellings for disabled people are in the social rented sector. Over the decades the proportion of tenant heads of household who are categorised as 'permanently sick or disabled' for the purposes of the Labour Force Surveys or the English Housing Survey have risen from 4% of council tenants and 3% of housing association tenants in 1981 to 9 and 8% respectively, by 1995 (Wilcox, 1996, Table 31). This might have been expected given the high amount of building activity for that purpose, clearly reflecting policy orientation, but the shift in the balance is also significant because the social rented sector has become the 'special needs' provider—in a context of its tenants being the poorest and least economically active citizens in the country. The proportion of 'permanently sick or disabled' heads of household in other tenures has remained both lower and flat.

The deregulation of private renting is not a significant policy context for our discussions here, but the changes in housing finance are. Basically, there are two ways of providing a subsidy: either for the dwelling itself (what the last Tory government called a 'bricks and mortar' subsidy) or for the tenants. The Thatcher governments moved away from the traditional subsidy for the dwelling which had served public housing for 60 years or more, towards means-tested housing assistance. Of course, this has been a gradual and partial process, but the current balance

is that, rather than an Exchequer subsidy, a 'market' rent or, depending on personal financial circumstances, a social security means-tested payment (Housing Benefit) should pay for social rented housing. This move has had a number of consequences for disabled people which we discuss below.

As housing associations take on a more prominent rôle in social rented housing generally and 'special needs' housing in particular, it is important to understand the impact of these fiscal changes on housing associations. The lowering in 1996–97 of the Housing Association Grant (HAG) from 80 to 58% of scheme costs makes it more difficult for housing associations to provide low rent tenancies for general needs housing. The rationale for the reduction in HAG and the promotion of competition among housing associations is to encourage them to seek private financing (DoE, 1995, p. 27). All housing associations are now faced with either using their reserves, borrowing more heavily or both. A partial solution lies with Housing Benefit: put up the rents to cover the grant shortfall and tenants receive higher benefits. Tenants have faced increases in housing association assured rents of 80% between 1989 and 1994 (National Federation of Housing Associations, 1995), and this trend has led to levels which are now at or above private market rents in many regions (Wilcox, 1996, p. 62–63).

It may be argued, however, that Housing Benefit produces a poverty trap for those households in receipt (Line, 1995) and a more homogeneous group of tenants in terms of income (c.f. Willmott & Murie, 1988). There is an increasing tendency for the tenants of all social rented housing to be low income households. However, the proportion of new housing association tenants who are unemployed is now higher than that of new LHA tenants: 'higher housing association rent levels are leading to the greater concentration of economically inactive and benefit-dependent households within the housing association sector' (Wilcox, 1996, p. 50, and Figure IX). The proportion of all social renting tenants in England who receive some Housing Benefit, had reached 79% by 1994 (Wilcox, 1996, Tables 16a and p. 111). Reliance on this income source for housing associations though is unpredictable as it is based on rents falling within the Local Reference Rent Levels. The last government introduced this restriction on the housing benefit scheme to apply when housing association rents were nosing above the average for the area. Of course, the government was seeking to counter the rather obvious ploy which housing associations were pursuing to manage their costs. However, it can be argued that such a combination of subsidy and benefit changes has halted the rise in social sector rents.

Benefit Dependency

Even if one believed that disability benefits were adequate, such a view would seem to miss the point of the 'culture of benefit dependency' into which disabled people may be drawn. The 'dependency' would arise because in order to obtain help with housing, disabled people—and wheelchair users especially—would in future be expected to be receiving benefits, otherwise they could not afford the rents of housing association tenancies.

The review of welfare policy begun in late 1997 may lead in future to one

questioning both the adequacy of benefits and the usefulness of the concept of 'dependency' in understanding the circumstances of disabled people. It is widely claimed that changes in social security policy undertaken by the last government locked disabled people, *inter alia*, into benefit dependency carrying with it stigmatisation and a sense of exclusion from the majority in non-disabled society. [7] Furthermore, whilst the 'bricks and mortar' subsidy system for housing may have had disadvantages, the current one, which is means-tested and, hence, individualised, proceeds from a darker line of descent about notions of 'deservingness' and ability to work.

Successive governments have wrestled with what we now popularly term 'benefit dependency' and the problems it is said to entrain. The framers of the Poor Law Amendment Act back in 1834 were famously exercised with the perceived curse of the feckless indigent breeding on the poor rates, though they recognised that the 'impotent poor' (disabled people) were more deserving 'cases'. The basic problem of how to provide outdoor relief to the 'deserving poor', whilst encouraging self-reliance and preventing descent into 'absolute' poverty does not go away. The late nineteenth century witnessed the growth of organised charity as one solution, the vestiges of which remain. Disabled activists have struggled to free themselves from its discretionary and often demeaning sentimental clutches, mainly via rights of entitlement to benefits and services.

Following such a path inevitably brings disabled people into the political arena where priorities for spending are set and although, historically, governments have fought shy of challenging the 'deserving' status of disabled people, the new Labour government may abandon that shibboleth. Just 8 months into its administration, leaked papers indicated that the government was considering the abolition of Industrial Injuries Benefit for existing claimants. At least five members of the Cabinet opposed that and any other proposed cuts in benefits for disabled people. David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment is alleged to have written in a memo to the Chancellor of the Exchequer that, 'Deep cuts in the totality of support for those disabled people who either cannot work or can find only very modestly paid work would make a mockery of our profession on social exclusion and the construction of a more just society' (*Independent*, 22.12.97, p. 1). In addition, he claimed that proposals to tax the Disability Living Allowance would inappropriately create disincentives to work and save. However, David Blunkett saved his strongest criticism for the proposal to give responsibility for the payment of Disability Living Allowance for under 65-year-olds to local authorities. This could create a situation in which disabled people would be competing with other local spending priorities and be delivered into the hands of social workers to determine, on a discretionary basis, part of their income (*Independent*, 23.12.97, p. 6). [8] Currently, the spending of DLA is at the discretion of the claimant and therefore can subsidise their basic living expenses, which is confirmed by recent research (Noble *et al.*, 1997, p. 748).

Blair has already indicated that he wants a leaner welfare state in which people on benefit (many fraudulently it was claimed, in which he included disability and incapacity benefits), are more actively encouraged to seek work. [9] Although Housing Benefit is not, at the time of writing, being reviewed, a government

committed to reforming the welfare state is unlikely to ignore it. The prime minister has indicated that he may be prepared to scrap, or at least suspend the 'integrity exercise' [10] which was set in motion by the previous government. The integrity exercise had already led to several thousands of people losing some or all of their Disability Living Allowance, and the government wished to ensure that disability organisations remain involved with the review (*Guardian*, 17.2.98, p. 10).

By eschewing charitable and discretionary welfare for rights and entitlements, disabled people have placed themselves in the rough-house of party politics where they are just as likely to be disparaged as 'dependent' and 'scroungers' as lone parents clearly are. The history of reducing benefits, or 'targeting' them more effectively, has been, first, to disparage the target, a process now underway with disabled people via the device of associating them with fraud: 'you should try to stop [benefit] going to people who are not genuinely disabled'; and second to accuse the group of being too rich anyway, 'ten billion pounds of the total £23.5bn [of disability benefits] went to the top 25 per cent of income earners' (*Independent*, 23.12.97, p. 6.). The point here is that in their pursuit of rights, disabled people have placed themselves on the political welfare agenda, which has resulted in their vilification rather than their allocation to the category of 'deserving poor' to which they have been accustomed. However, this false dichotomy promulgated by politicians and journalists fails to appreciate the third alternative which is concerned with the state's acceptance of its responsibility to ensure that all people have the means to exercise their rights of citizenship.

On present trends, if disabled people have a housing need it is only likely to be met by housing associations. Low personal financial resources and high housing costs in the social rented sector dictate continued dependency on benefit income for disabled people. Hence, the issue of benefit reduction, affecting actual ability to pay for housing, and the ideological mode (a right or discretionary) in which it is paid is of crucial concern to disabled people. This conclusion rests on the assumption that disabled people will continue to be excluded from mainstream economic activity at average levels of earned income (which would still fail to meet the additional costs of impairment), despite the political rhetoric about welfare-to-work. Unless the government returns completely to a 'bricks and mortar' subsidy for social rented housing then the Benefits Review (discussed via its press coverage above) must recognise that the current mode of funding is as much a cause of disablement as is the housing design. To continue with the reliance on Housing Benefit, traps the government into perpetuating the contradiction of the disabling dependency they seek to end. The government seeks to develop 'a system (of social security) that promotes the inclusion of sick and disabled people, and not their exclusion. A system that offers opportunities and encouragement, not one that fosters dependency. And above all, a system which enables disabled people to live with independence and dignity' (Baroness Hollis, 'Minister heralds new era for sick and disabled people' DSS press release 97/248 of 17 November 1997). If they mean this, they will not achieve it by cleaving to a mode of subsidy which is disabling. There are two steps forward and one back. The government has recently reformed the building regulations to improve access to all new domestic dwellings and have acknowledged

that disabled people are capable of employment, but the funding arrangements for housing create a benefit dependency trap.

Increased rents leading to 'enhanced' benefit dependency is just one aspect of the slide from 'bricks and mortar' subsidies. Dwellings suitable for disabled people are more expensive to build than other sorts, which is reflected in grant subsidy by the application of a 'multiplier' to the total building cost indicator for the area. Now that HAG subsidy, even with the multiplier, has been dramatically reduced, housing associations have either to seek more private financing, or use their own resources. What they are not supposed to do is charge tenants in costly wheelchair housing higher rents than their tenants in general needs housing. There is current uncertainty as to whether and to what extent that practice is occurring. One might argue that the significance for wheelchair housing tenants of differential rents is actually undermined by their, at the moment, protected Housing Benefit payment. If that remains so, one should not also accuse these tenants of being in a state of benefit dependency, as they did not make, nor can they spring, the trap which subsidy and Housing Benefit have created. Under the current system, it appears that many disabled people are inevitably forced into benefit dependency and, yet, may subsequently be pilloried for it.

However, the revised modes of subsidising accessible housing tend to make the objective assessment of need less important by, in effect, pushing the expression of need onto rent-levels, though as we have noted, Housing Benefit could turn that rationing device into a cushion upon which claimants may be accused of sitting in dependency. The new idea of Lifetime Homes appears, by its costings which are comparable with general need housing and the delay it allows in having to take the decision to adapt fully, to solve both the crucial question of need as expressed by 'experts' versus demand from users, and the problems of either higher subsidies or higher rents (Cobbold, 1997). Lifetime Homes can be thought of as universalist in that anyone could occupy them and in consequence they neither stigmatise nor create dependency, whilst the decision to adapt fully can still be related to individual needs and circumstances. The management advantages for registered social landlords are obvious.

Conclusions

The origins of 'special needs' housing can be traced through the response of governments over the years to the 'problem' of the provision of accessible homes for disabled people. As we have demonstrated, the social policies which have informed these responses have been firmly rooted within an individual model of disability. It is evident also that the responses have in many respects created their own problems when devising 'solutions'. Much effort, finance and resources have been poured into attempting to assess demand and need for 'special needs' housing and then finding suitable tenants for it. With the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to comprehend why more effort was not directed to lateral thinking—as this process leads directly to the innovation of Lifetime Homes.

The effects of changes in housing finance we have detailed, with more reliance

upon Housing Benefit to resource housing solutions, will jeopardise much good work to date in establishing rights to accessible housing. The current moves which render the provision of accessible homes inextricably tied to Housing Benefit in many ways resurrect the old modes of dependency which have only recently begun to be dislodged, and which foreshadow further stigmatisation and individualisation owing to the general abhorrence of ‘benefit dependency’. These moves therefore represent a retrograde step within the conceptualisation of disablement in society, and must be recognised and resisted.

The history of ‘special needs’ policies in housing therefore, can be viewed with hindsight as rooted within the individual model of disability, which has constrained the thinking of policy makers and consequently reduced the possibility of realising a universalist policy. Whilst the current situation can be viewed as vastly improved in certain respects, there is no room for complacency or for arguing that the provision and resourcing of ‘special needs’ housing is a battle won.

NOTES

- [1] The Cullingworth Committee quote a memorandum from a director of housing: ‘The cost of ensuring that at least a percentage of all ground floor flats or bungalows are built in such a way as to be particularly suitable for physically handicapped persons is minimal. The provision of wide door openings, space for a wheel chair alongside the toilet ... [and similar adaptations] only represents a fractional increase in initial building costs, but the same items cost quite staggering sums of money if they have to be provided at a later date.... There is merit in ensuring that in every new housing development a small number of homes are provided with the kind of feature mentioned, even if no special need is immediately apparent’, as the dwelling could be re-let to a disabled person later (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1969, para 114).
- [2] The UN Resolution is referred to in ‘Lifetime Homes in Europe and the UK’: see note 5.
- [3] ‘There is a fear that specially designed dwellings will be “wasted”. One housing manager stated that in his experience the inclusion of a proportion of such dwellings in building programmes was “practically unsound: special building would either have to be kept empty for a suitable tenant or if occupied (and these dwellings would normally be occupied by aged persons), it would mean uprooting the aged tenants to make way for an invalid tenant” ’ [the language itself is worth reporting].
- [4] We are indebted to NATWHAG for access to the relevant CORE data tables as presented in: Carroll, C (1997) *A brief analysis of CORE statistics on the allocation of wheelchair units and the allocation of housing to wheelchair users in the housing association sector during the years 1994, 1995 and 1996, internal report to Executive Committee of the National Wheelchair Housing Association Group* (London).
- [5] Brewerton and Ambrose describe Lifetime Homes as a standard of building which would mean that all such housing built to that standard would have the potential to be adapted for use by a disabled person: see ‘Lifetime Homes in Europe and the UK: European legislation and good practice for ensuring accessibility of domestic dwellings’ in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation series, *Findings*, Feb 1997.
- [6] Our report to NATWHAG presents the data on housing for disabled people and explains various approaches to estimating the need for it. The two data sets are derived from the Housing Construction Statistics or the DoE HIP1 returns from local housing authorities.
- [7] For instance, the Prime Minister Tony Blair has sketched such an argument: ‘Blair is on a mission. Driven by Thatcherite zeal. And the sick and disabled are next on the list’ (*Independent*, 15.12.97, p. 1).

- [8] For further political background on the relationship between central and local government on the issue of dividing responsibility for providing 'cash and care' see Stewart, G. & Stewart, J. (1986), *Boundary Changes: social work and social security*, London, Child Poverty Action Group.
- [9] Some indicative newspaper references follow: 'Blair warns on benefit cuts' (*Independent on Sunday*, 21.12.97, p. 2); 'Blair warns angry MPs that he won't bend on welfare reform' (*Independent*, 18.12.97, p. 1.).
- [10] 'The Benefit Integrity Project is designed to help ensure the correctness of ongoing awards of DLA by collecting up-to-date information from people receiving the higher rate of the DLA mobility component with either the middle or highest rate of the DLA care component, through a programme of home visits and postal enquires' ('Harman announces extra safeguards for disabled benefit claimants', DSS press release 98/027 9, February 1998).

REFERENCES

- ARNOLD, P., BOCHEL, H., BRODHURST, S. & PAGE, D. (1993) *Community Care: the housing dimension* (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation).
- BARNES, C. (1991) *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination: a case for anti-discrimination legislation* (London, Hurst & Company).
- BUCKLE, J.R. (1971) *Work and Housing of Impaired Persons in Great Britain* (London, HMSO).
- COBOLD, C. (1997) *A Cost Benefit Analysis of Lifetime Homes* (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation).
- DAVIS, K. (1981) 28–38 Grove Road: accommodation and care in a community setting, in: A. BRECHIN, P. LIDDIARD & J. SWAIN (Eds) *Handicap in a Social World* (Sevenoaks, Hodder and Stoughton).
- DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (1970–1995, various issues) *Housing Construction Statistics* (Quarterly series) (London, HMSO).
- DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (1974) *Housing for People who are Physically Handicapped*, circular 74/74 (London, Department of the Environment).
- DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (1991) *Annual Report 1991*, Cm. 1508 (London, HMSO).
- DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (1995) *Our Future Homes: opportunity, choice, responsibility*, Cm. 2901 (London, HMSO).
- DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS (1998) *Better Access Planned for New Homes—Construction Minister Nick Raynsford*, DETR press release 178/ENV, 9 March.
- DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT (1997) *Housing and Community Care: establishing a strategic framework* (London, Department of Health).
- FINKELSTEIN, V. (1980) *Attitudes and Disabled People: issues for discussion* (New York, World Rehabilitation Fund).
- GOLDSMITH, S. (1974) *Mobility Housing*, Housing Development Directorate Paper 2/74 (London, HMSO).
- GOLDSMITH, S. (1975) *Wheelchair Housing*, Housing Development Directorate Paper 2/75 (London, HMSO).
- HARRIS, J., SAPEY, B. & STEWART, J. (1997) *Wheelchair Housing and the Estimation of Need* (Preston, University of Central Lancashire).
- HOUSE OF COMMONS DEBATES (1969) *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill*, session 1969–70, vol. 792 (London, HMSO).
- HOUSE OF COMMONS DEBATES, STANDING COMMITTEE C (1970) *Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Bill*, 4th February, session 1969–70, vol. 2 (London, HMSO).
- HOUSE OF LORDS DEBATES (1995) *Wheelchair Accommodation Provision: reports*, session 1994–95, vol. 560 (London, HMSO).

- THE HOUSING CORPORATION (1991) *Housing for People with Disabilities: the needs of wheelchair users* (London, The Housing Corporation).
- LINE, B. (1995) Rents, benefits and affordability, *Housing Review*, 44(4), pp. 96–97.
- LUND, B. & FOORD, M. (1997) *Towards Integrated Living? Housing Strategies and Community Care* (Bristol, The Policy Press).
- MALPASS, P. (1996) The unravelling of housing policy in Britain, *Housing Studies*, 11(3), pp. 459–470.
- MCCAFFERTY, P. (1995) *Living Independently: a study of the housing needs of elderly and disabled people* (London, HMSO).
- MINISTRY OF HOUSING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT (1969) *Council Housing, Purposes, Procedures and Priorities*, Cullingworth chair (London, HMSO).
- MORRIS, J. (1988) *Freedom to Lose: housing policy and people with disabilities* (London, Shelter).
- NATIONAL FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS (1995) *CORE Lettings Bulletin*, no. 21.
- NOBLE, M., PLATT, L., SMITH, G. & DALY, M. (1997) The spread of Disability Living Allowance, *Disability & Society*, 12, pp. 741–751.
- OLIVER, M. (1983) *Social Work with Disabled People* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- OLIVER, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- OLIVER, M. (1996) *Understanding Disability: from theory to practice* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
- OUNSTED, D. (1987) *Wheelchairs No Handicap in Housing* (London, National Federation of Housing Associations).
- RADAR (1992) *Housing—a question of influence* (London, Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation).
- RATZKA, A. (1991) The Swedish Experience, in: L. LAURIE (Ed.) *Building Our Lives: housing, independent living and disabled people* (London, Shelter).
- STEWART, J., HARRIS, J. & SAPEY, B. (1998) Truth or manipulation: the politics of government funded disability research, *Disability & Society*, 13, pp. 297–300.
- TOPLISS, E. & GOULD, B. (1981) *A Charter for the Disabled* (Oxford, Blackwell).
- WILCOX, S. (1996) *Housing Finance Review 1996/97* (York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation).
- WILLMOTT, P. & MURIE, A. (1988) *Polarisation and Social Housing* (London, Policy Studies Institute).