

Asset management and housing stock optimisation: Essex County Council

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Context

In April 2024, new consumer standards were introduced for social housing landlords, designed to drive long-term improvements in the sector to provide quality homes and services for tenants. The changes are a result of the Social Housing Regulation Act (2023) and include stronger powers to hold landlords to account.

Landlords are assessed against the new standards through regular inspections and scrutiny of data on tenant satisfaction and repairs. The standards require providers to have accurate records of the condition of their homes, based on physical assessment. Homes that are designed or adapted to meet specific needs should be allocated appropriately.

The Challenge

Local data was held detailing where adaptation works had been completed to properties, however individual properties weren't actively surveyed to establish current or potential adaptability.

Before the OT's involvement, the council had no systematic way to:

- Identify the extent of accessible features in properties within their housing stock
- Advertise the level of accessibility a property currently offered or had the potential to offer
- Determine whether a property could be adapted to meet wheelchair accessibility standards
- Offer applicants with accessibility needs a choice of properties that were adapted or had the potential to be adapted in future
- Prevent loss of adapted properties when tenants moved (if adaptations were removed during void periods)
- Track their accessible housing stock across the social housing register

The void period following the end of a tenancy provided an opportunity to complete an inspection and record existing and potential adaptability levels. The housing OT worked with the Head of Assets and New Homes to help develop a comprehensive property coding system that is now embedded in the council's workflow. Multiple teams use it for different purposes.

The role

- Creation of accessibility assessment framework – Development of a checklist based on Building Regulations M4(3) standards (2010) and the London Accessible Housing Register (LAHR) (2011) to identify the minimum essential features for accessibility.
- Void property surveys – Inspection of void properties to discuss and explain accessibility features and limitations for data reliability.
- Software system integration – Assets Manager created workflow to generate a code that indicates the level of accessibility, for example current or potential ease of access. Ensuring the results of the property survey is built into the property management system so information is readily available to all relevant teams.
- Social housing register support - Providing accurate accessibility information for properties advertised through choice-based lettings.

- Clear communication for applicants – Creation of video tours of available properties. This is especially useful for applicants who are wheelchair users.
- Identifying adaptable properties - Identifying properties with adaptation potential so resources can be targeted appropriately.
- Strategic void management - Preventing removal of valuable adaptations during void periods by flagging which features should be retained.
- Refurbishment planning – Data is available to void and refurbishment teams when bathrooms or kitchens are being updated to maximise accessibility features.
- Future-proofing new builds - Ensuring additional joists and structural supports are installed during refurbishments to facilitate potential future adaptations (for example, through-floor lifts).

Benefits to the system

Housing benefits

- Compliance with regulatory requirements to accurately show and describe all properties
- Systematic knowledge of the accessible housing stock across the social housing portfolio
- Prevention of loss of adapted properties during void periods - retaining valuable accessibility features
- More efficient void management - knowing which properties to prioritise for applicants with specific needs
- Strategic refurbishment planning that incorporates cost-effective accessibility features
- Better use of capital investment by installing future-proofing features during planned works
- Reduced void times through better matching of properties to applicants
- In Choice Based Lettings model – fewer appeals from applicants to challenge the level of accessibility or suitability to meet their needs

Health/social care benefits

- Decreased hospital discharge delays by identifying suitable properties quickly
- Prevention of unsuitable allocations that would require immediate adaptations
- Better outcomes through Choice Based Lettings by matching people to properties effectively
- Reduced demand on adaptation services for straightforward cases

Benefits to individuals and families

- Applicants receive accurate information about property accessibility before viewing
- Wheelchair users and people with mobility needs can identify suitable properties themselves through the register
- Families can move into properties knowing if it is suitable rather than moving because it's better than what they had, but not as accessible as they need
- Reduced stress of moving into accommodation if it has the potential to be adapted instead of then waiting in future to be rehoused
- Greater choice and control over housing decisions with transparent accessibility information
- Prevention of unsuitable placements that would have negative health impacts

Developing the role: a practical guide

Setting up the role

- Begin with a clear business case - identify the legal, financial, and operational drivers (such as regulatory and compliance requirements, budget pressures, void costs)
- Secure commitment from housing leadership that this is a strategic priority, not an 'OT project'
- Identify existing property data systems and work with IT to ensure the accessibility survey and workflow can be integrated
- Start with a pilot area or property type to test and refine the assessment framework

- Establish which teams need to be involved: asset management, void management, adaptations, repairs, housing register manager, allocations
- Create a project timeline with clear milestones (for example, percentage of stock coded within 12 months)

Building the property assessment system

- Develop a clear, simple classification system that can be consistently applied (such as LAHR categories)
- Include both current accessibility and adaptation potential in the assessment framework
- Create guidance documents with photos/diagrams showing what features place a property in each category
- Design assessment forms to be completed as part of existing processes such as during routine void inspections and new build home completions, to avoid additional work
- Build the classification system into the property database so it appears on housing register advertisements automatically
- Train void teams, housing officers, and allocations staff on how to use the system

Overcoming challenges

- **Challenge:** Resistance from housing colleagues who see this as extra work during already-pressured void periods
- **Solution:** Demonstrate that this saves time by reducing unsuitable allocations and subsequent adaptation requests. Show how it protects void teams from removing valuable adaptations they didn't know were there. Integrate assessment into existing void inspection processes with simple tick-box forms or tablet app.
- **Challenge:** Inconsistent application of the classification system across different assessors
- **Solution:** Keep it simple. Provide clear visual guidance with photographs of what each classification level looks like. Offer training sessions and accompany assessors on initial property visits. Create a quality assurance process where the OT spot-checks a sample of assessments.
- **Challenge:** Backlog of existing stock that needs coding while also managing new voids
- **Solution:** Prioritise properties as they become void or undergo refurbishment rather than trying to assess all stock immediately. Use student placements or temporary staff to accelerate the initial coding process. Set realistic targets.
- **Challenge:** Properties that fall between categories or have mixed accessibility features
- **Solution:** Develop clear decision-making criteria for edge cases. Create a 'notes' field for properties with unusual features. Establish the OT as key contributor for difficult categorisation decisions.

Demonstrating impact

- Track the percentage of housing stock that has been coded
- Monitor reduction in unsuitable allocations that result in immediate adaptation requests
- Calculate cost savings from retaining adaptations during void periods rather than removing and later reinstalling
- Measure reduction in adaptation applications for properties that were matched appropriately using the system
- Document reduction in complaints from applicants about inaccurate accessibility information
- Track void times for accessible properties before and after implementation of the system
- Record number of properties future-proofed with adaptations, or new build homes built to higher standards, and potential cost avoidance

Top tips for managers

- Frame this work as strategic asset management, not just an OT initiative - it needs housing leadership buy-in
- Invest time upfront in system design and IT integration - a well-designed system will be used, a clunky one won't
- Ensure the OT has regular access to void property information and can visit properties during void periods
- Create clear accountability for maintaining the system once initial coding is complete
- Build accessibility assessment into standard void inspection procedures so it becomes routine
- Use compelling case studies of unsuitable allocations that could have been prevented to maintain momentum
- Connect this work to corporate priorities such as legal compliance, budget management, and customer satisfaction
- Celebrate milestones to maintain staff engagement across housing teams