



Foundations

THE NATIONAL BODY FOR
HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCIES

Adapting for a lifetime



The key role of home improvement
agencies in adaptations delivery

January 2010

About the Future HIA project

In Autumn 2007 Foundations, the national body for home improvement agencies, was commissioned by Communities and Local Government to carry out research examining the options for the future delivery of home improvement agency services. The resulting reports have drawn on examples from within and outside the home improvement agency sector to highlight possible areas for development. They do not present a one-size-fits-all model, but a series of options that may be appropriate depending on the identified needs of the local population, taking account of other services already in place.

This document is the final project sub-report, and it concerns the role of home improvement agencies in delivering major adaptations. The report:

- examines the effect of recent changes to the Disabled Facilities Grant programme, drawing on research carried out within the home improvement agency sector
- looks at the challenges presented by the complexity of the process, the funding shortages and the lack of partnership working
- asks why home improvement agencies are needed to deliver adaptations
- sets out examples of innovation and good practice in delivering major adaptations
- spells out how adaptations can move from a provider-led to a client-led process, and
- makes recommendations for the future development of home improvement agencies in relation to delivering major adaptations.

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Executive summary

The effect of modernising the approach to adaptations

The provision of disabled adaptations has been the subject of a recent government review, as well as a package of measures announced by Communities and Local Government in February 2008 to modernise provision.

Research carried out by Foundations to inform this report indicates that increased spending by central government in the last two financial years is matched by a corresponding increase in Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) work completed by home improvement agencies.

There is now evidence of a greater take-up by local authorities of the option to register a charge on the property for adaptations which cost more than £5,000. Other changes, such as raising the grant maximum to £30,000 and removing means-testing for parents of disabled children, do not appear to have significantly changed the patterns of spend across client groups.

Local authority contributions to DFG funding may be changing now as even greater pressure is placed on budgets due to the recession, and there are very real fears about the impact of cuts in local authority finances which have been forecast for next year, despite one further year of increased spending by central government.

Why changes to the adaptations approach are needed

DFG funding has increased significantly, but there is continuing pressure on budgets for local authorities. In the coming decades, greater numbers of older and physically disabled people will require adaptations to their homes to maintain independent living. To meet this growing demand, adaptations services need to change and become integrated into a wider suite of options for maintaining independence.

The current process for delivering major adaptations is still dominated by the various groups of professionals involved. Notwithstanding recent changes to the DFG process, people in need of adaptations often suffer as a result of the lack of uniformity around the process, not knowing how long they will have to wait or what adaptation options will be available. This applies to all tenures. The difficulties surrounding the DFG process run counter to the government's plans to encourage greater personalisation of care and support services.

Home improvement agencies deliver adaptations but are much less likely to be involved strategically in developing and improving services. This is partly because some local authority partners perceive home improvement agencies as solely a mechanism for processing grants. However, home improvement agencies need to challenge the view that they cannot contribute in a strategic way.

Getting the most out of DFG budgets

Home improvement agencies can help local authorities get the most from their adaptations budgets, particularly if those adaptations provide part of a wider service. A holistic approach to the assessment process can lead to an alternative solution being identified which achieves better value for the public purse, is more acceptable to the client, and is in line with the recent changes and flexibility introduced to the DFG programme. There are already a number of initiatives around the country that could be replicated by other home improvement agencies and their local authority partners.

Home improvement agencies can help get the most out of DFG budgets in the following ways.

- **Adding value for commissioners.** The need for adaptations usually occurs concurrently with other needs for housing-related intervention. Integrated home improvement agency services consider the place of adaptations within the wider suite of services they provide.
- **Working across a county.** A number of home improvement agencies have contributed to reducing the complexity and variation of adaptations services in two-tier authorities by working across district boundaries. Having a shared delivery service for major adaptations has led to districts developing shared protocols and practices, standardising and streamlining processes with local authority partners.
- **Re-using equipment.** Some adaptations equipment can be economically recovered and re-used. Home improvement agencies can help to improve the availability of second-hand equipment in their areas. They can innovate in developing leasing arrangements for larger items of equipment such as stairlifts, and deploying a new generation of pre-fabricated and modular extensions - some of which can be used again - to reduce the cost of some of the most expensive adaptations.
- **Better supply-chain management of adaptations equipment.** Home improvement agencies can work individually or collectively (with other home improvement agencies or collective procurement consortiums) to improve the cost, speed, and level of service from suppliers and installers of adaptations equipment.

A team approach to delivering adaptations

One area with the potential to transform the DFG process is the greater use of handypersons to deliver minor adaptations. Providing a handyperson service with the capability to assess need as well as carry out the work required will free up occupational therapists to concentrate on more complex cases. Home improvement agency handypersons and other staff who achieve Trusted Technician¹ status or other forms of external accreditation will make their services more attractive to commissioners and partners in social care authorities.

Some of the best practice in the country can be found where occupational therapists have been seconded to work within home improvement agencies or in grants departments. This improves

¹ The Trusted Technician qualification is designed to equip home improvement agency staff with the skills to understand a client's needs and fix a range of products at their home. It assesses a series of competencies based upon the Department of Health 'Trusted Assessor' framework.

day-to-day communication and leads to better co-ordination and more effective case management.

Moving from a provider-led to a user-led process

For adaptations to become better integrated, strong links should be developed between the DFG referral process and a holistic housing options advice service. Adaptations to a person's current home should be considered as one of several alternatives such as a move to more suitable or specialist accommodation elsewhere. The Future HIA report *Support for Choice*² provides more details on the importance of providing options prior to deciding on a course of action, through a full range of advice and information to ensure that clients are supported to achieve the best solution for their housing needs.

Studies have shown that the success of an adaptation (that is, how much it is used) depends on the degree to which the person using it is involved in selecting the right kind of adaptation for their needs³, plus the broader impact which an adaptation has on the person's sense of *home*⁴. The advice of a qualified and experienced professional must work alongside - not against - the wishes of the individual living in their home environment. Policies which offer flexible solutions as well as DFG-funded major adaptations, such as those developed by a number of leading local authorities described within this report, need to be put in place in order to accommodate the drive towards greater user control, choice and personalisation of services.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

Adaptations delivery in England

1. The need to change the approach to adaptations has become more urgent as a result of rising demand. Funding may become scarcer as the impact of the recession takes its toll on local authority finances.
2. The current problems in delivery of adaptations are not simply the result of funding shortages, but also symptoms of inefficient practices and a belief that stretching out budgets by building delays into the process will protect authorities from greater demand and increased risk of failure. The complexities of these issues means that more is needed to solve this crisis than simply money.
3. The preventative benefits of adaptations, including the cost savings to health and social care budgets, are often lost due to the time which many people have to wait, and because access can be restricted for those not considered to be in highest need. Although speed is therefore crucially important in the delivery of adaptations, it is not the only consideration – effective adaptations also need to be right for the individual client, and agreeing the right course of action in cases where more than a simple adaptation is required can take time.

² http://wwwFOUNDATIONS.UK.COM/resources/future_hia_booklets/support_for_choice_advice_information_signposting_and_advocacy

³ *Better outcomes, lower costs: implications for health and social care budgets of investment in housing adaptations, improvement and equipment: a review of the evidence*, Heywood F and Turner L, 2001

⁴ *Adaptation: Altering the House to Restore the Home*, Heywood F, 2005

4. The bureaucracy and process delays around the Disabled Facilities Grant show little sign of changing, despite the modernisation of the programme. Simple, lower-cost adaptations such as stairlifts and level-access showers should not be subject to the level of assessment, means-testing and officer time necessary in order for them to be funded through a DFG.

The role of home improvement agencies

5. Major adaptations are a core element of what many home improvement agencies do. Our findings from sector surveys and other data sources show that home improvement agencies are increasingly involved in delivering DFG-funded adaptations, and that the changes to the national DFG programme announced in February 2008 are starting to bed down within local services. However, there are concerns that waiting times are increasing.
6. The overall performance of agencies in delivering adaptations varies. There are many examples of good practice, with agencies using innovative ideas to improve processes and save budgets, as well as various forms of recycling. However, agencies need to work well with other professionals, demonstrate that what they are adding is of value, and drive improvements in efficiency.

Our vision for the delivery of adaptations services

We would like major adaptations to be viewed as one of a wide range of solutions to a problem which prevents independent living and increases the risk of falls and accidents in the home. Other solutions (such as minor adaptations, handy person services, assistive technology, housing options services, relocation grants, help finding an accessible property and even help to purchase an accessible property) are all part of the same continuum of housing support services and are all worthy of consideration for public funding if clients lack the ability to pay.

Increasingly, adaptations services (and who will provide them) will largely be chosen by clients, with appropriate support from advocates where necessary. The amount of administration involved in delivering services, as well as the means-testing and assessment processes, will be proportionate to the cost, the complexity of the work proposed, and the forecast benefit.

Recommendations

For home improvement agencies

1. Home improvement agencies should engage further with the opportunities arising from the DFG modernisation programme, including the greater flexibility for use of the DFG grant and local authority contribution. Agencies can play a strategic part in transforming adaptations services from the current focus on a single grant process to one that is integrated into a range of options for independent living.
2. To build a stronger case for funding from health and social care, home improvement agencies need to benchmark their performance and commit to more detailed monitoring and evaluation of the medium and longer term outcomes of their adaptations work. To help achieve this they should consider some of the service models which allow the agency to maintain longer term contact with their clients, such as an annual maintenance service or property 'health check'.

3. Home improvement agencies can utilise their individual and collective resources to improve processes for procuring equipment and labour, contributing to improvements not only in the DFG process, but also in the returns on the resources deployed. Agencies should work co-operatively to benchmark costs and investigate whether better value from suppliers could be obtained through procurement consortia.
4. Home improvement agencies stand the best chance of developing cost and process efficiencies if they operate as strategic partners with the local authority to deliver a large proportion of all adaptations, including typically high volumes of lower cost adaptations, rather than being considered as 'guns for hire' for use in complex cases only.
5. Home improvement agencies need to be aware of the challenges to adaptations services driven by broader policy initiatives such as the personalisation agenda. This could force major changes, including greater competition from the commercial sector, by placing the buying power directly in the hands of clients. However, it also suggests a possible new role for the sector as adaptations 'advocates'. And, in cost-conscious times, the adoption of more progressive adaptations policies within local authorities may present opportunities for agencies to develop local accessible property registers.

For local and national policy makers

6. It is vital to break down the single-solution mentality caused by the current domination of the Disabled Facilities Grant. At a local authority level this could be achieved by changing local adaptations policies to deliver multiple forms of assistance for disabled people, using the 40% contribution which previously had to be committed to the DFG pot.
7. We encourage local authority housing departments to work with their home improvement agency partners to develop a range of imaginative policy approaches which meet the differing needs of local populations, and address the local housing stock characteristics and the changing demographics.
8. We stress the importance of providing holistic housing options services in tandem with adaptations services, to ensure that all alternatives are considered before a client is consigned to the waiting list for a DFG which may not be the best solution for their needs.
9. At a national level, we recommend that the DFG minimum grant should be raised to £7,000 to remove all lower value, routine adaptations such as stairlifts and level-access showers from other high-value work which is complex enough to justify the costs of processing applications. If it is not possible to separate such items from the DFG process by cost, certain categories of routine adaptations could be excluded and delivered using greatly simplified assessment, application approval, means-testing and specification processes.
10. When reviewing adaptations policy at a national level, the social care and health beneficiaries of the cost savings achieved by adaptations should also become the main source of funding for these interventions. This change might be more feasible if there is a national evaluation of the cost savings achieved by the DFG programme, similar to the recent analysis undertaken by CapGemini of services funded by Supporting People. Any analysis should also assess the funding currently available within local authorities to pay for adaptations, and estimate the true scale of unmet demand nationally (which could be expressed as potential further cost savings).

1. Context for changing our approach to adaptations



Changes in national policy

The delivery of major adaptations in England has been the subject of continuing scrutiny and revision in recent years, starting with central government commissioning an independent review by Bristol University in 2005 to focus on the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). The report, *Reviewing the Disabled Facilities Grant Programme*, found a number of weaknesses, including an over-complex system and a bureaucratic process which builds in delays. This, coupled with continued pressure on funding, had resulted in a system in urgent need of modernisation.

The review report recommended removing the means test for parents of disabled children, a change which was implemented almost immediately in January 2006. Other changes were announced alongside the publication of *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: a national strategy for housing in an ageing society* in February 2008, including:

- removing the 60:40 funding split, meaning local authorities were no longer obliged to commit resources to obtain the central government allocation
- raising the grant maximum to £30,000, and
- allowing charges to be made against the property for grants exceeding £5,000 (up to a maximum of £10,000), meaning that some of the costs of adaptations can be recouped if the home is sold less than 10 years after the adaptation is installed.

In addition to these immediate changes, the following measures were proposed to modernise the system.

- Removing the DFG ringfence, which will enable more local authorities to pool budgets and provide services more suited to local needs. At the moment this is being piloted in four authority areas: Cumbria (including all of its six district authorities), Oldham, Sheffield and the London Borough of Westminster. The pilots will run until the end of 2010.
- Changing the allocation of DFG funding away from the current model, which involves a bidding process that sometimes produces alarming anomalies between amounts allocated and the likely demand within local authority populations.

- Changing the means test for a DFG: a number of options are being considered, including using the 'Fairer Charging for non-residential social care services' means test.
- Closer alignment of major adaptations funding and policy across all housing tenures, tied into a review of council housing finance and the release of good practice guidance on adaptations aimed at social housing providers.

Drivers for change in adaptations delivery

Demographic changes

Our ageing society will bring an increase in the number of older people living at home, resulting in more demand for adaptations to make homes suitable for their needs. The number of people aged 65 or over will increase by 23% by 2019, growing to 56% by 2031. The number of people aged 75 and over will see an increase of 70% by 2031⁵, compared with overall population growth of only 16%. Similar rises are predicted for the numbers of older people with disabilities, and amongst those, the proportion who will need work carried out to their homes to enable them to continue living independently. This increase in demand will be felt much more acutely in some areas, such as rural and coastal communities which are seeing a large inward migration of older people.

Demand has also been accelerated by changes in social policy and medical advances which have allowed people of all ages, with varying levels of disabilities and complex needs, to lead more independent lives in the community. Many children with serious inherited medical conditions are being treated more effectively and are therefore living longer into adulthood, which can mean that families need to adapt their homes more than once as the child becomes an adult and their requirements change.

Personalisation

The personalisation agenda will drastically alter the procurement of adaptations, as the power to choose and pay for services and equipment will increasingly be passed from statutory authorities into the direct control of individuals. DFGs were included in the individual budgets pilots which ran for 18 months during 2007/08. Although the pilot areas were unable to overcome structural difficulties posed by the lack of flexibility within the DFG system at the time, following the implementation of new powers within the Welfare Reform Act (2009) the next phase of pilots based around the *right to control*⁶ (known as 'trailblazer sites') will benefit from the relaxations of DFG funding and process rules which have already taken place. DFG will be included as one of the funding streams under test in around eight trailblazer sites which will get underway in 2010 and run for two to three years.

With such a large capital grant often involved, there are clear dangers in devolving too much responsibility around adaptations to individuals without having adequate safeguards and expertise to hand. A further concern is to make sure that the cost advantages gained from purchasing adaptations equipment in bulk are not lost. A new kind of service will be needed to

⁵ 2006-based Subnational Population Projections (SNPP) for England, ONS, 2008

⁶ *Right to control: a guide for local delivery agencies*, Office for Disability Issues (2009)

support individuals and ensure that well-reasoned decisions are being taken in the use of public funds, and these are areas where home improvement agencies could develop their potential as adaptations 'advocates' or 'brokers'. If these roles develop, there may be governance issues for agencies to address so that they are able to perform a dual role for some clients as both an advocate and a deliverer of adaptations services.

Transformation of Supporting People

Although not directly related to DFG funding, the transformation of Supporting People into 'non-statutory housing support' services, which will be controlled and commissioned in many areas by adult social care teams, creates an opportunity to strengthen the bond between housing, social care and health.

In areas where adaptations are dealt with by home improvement agencies, this changed commissioning environment will allow the agencies to build a better appreciation amongst social care professionals of the preventative nature of adaptations and demonstrate how they can enable independent living. With social services increasingly taking control of funding the adaptations services provided by home improvement agencies, a possible extension to this line of logic would be to include the DFG capital funding allocations within social care budgets.

Economic climate

The recession, and the recently announced cuts to reduce public borrowing which will follow in 2011, add significant pressure to local authorities to reduce expenditure on all services. Some have predicted budget reductions of up to 20% for the year 2010/11. Foundations tracked the impact of the removal of the 60:40 match-funding requirement with surveys of the home improvement agency sector in October 2008 and April 2009, and noticed no significant change in local authority funding levels. However, with our latest funding survey carried out in October 2009, we have started to observe much greater uncertainty as to the likely level of contributions to be made to adaptations budgets this year by local authorities, with more acute concerns expressed about funding levels for 2010/11. With many authorities already having used up their budget allocations halfway through 2009/10, any cuts in funding next year would have a serious impact on an already overstretched system. An analysis of the results from our October 2009 survey is presented in Chapter 2.

With such funding pressures, the need to demonstrate the benefits of adaptations to other public services is much more acute. However, the 'one-off' nature of much adaptations work makes the tracking of longer-term outcomes less easy to achieve. Although there is a well-researched evidence base⁷ supporting our belief that adaptations can reduce the need for more costly interventions, there are no established structural links between DFG budgets and the statutory beneficiaries of their preventative outcomes: acute health service and social care budget holders.

⁷ *Better outcomes, lower costs: implications for health and social care budgets of investment in housing adaptations, improvement and equipment: a review of the evidence*, Heywood F and Turner L, 2001

The use of DFG funding by registered social landlords

The position of social housing landlords in relation to DFG is an area which has seen a large amount of conflict, with inconsistent arrangements for paying for adaptations and frustration being expressed by both landlords and local authorities. However, forthcoming guidance from Communities and Local Government is expected to establish clearer lines of responsibility and accountability between registered social landlords (RSLs) and DFG budget-holders. With home improvement agencies aware of the perception that a larger percentage of the DFG pot is being spent on the social housing sector, not to mention that they are also more involved in adaptations delivery to clients in social housing, greater clarity over funding should be welcomed.

The current role of home improvement agencies in delivering adaptations

The challenges for the sector

Many agency managers will argue that the contribution of a home improvement agency to delivering major adaptations is essential. Their ability to work around the needs of the client as a whole, including issues which may not be relevant to DFG eligibility, places them in a strong position to respond effectively to requests for assistance. However, clearly there are also successful models for delivering adaptations which don't involve these agencies.

Many instances reported to Foundations suggest that major adaptations work is much less within the control of agencies themselves than other services that they offer. Some local authorities alter their arrangements for delivering DFGs, cutting the agency in or out of the equation without adequate warning or explanation.

Adaptations are one of the areas over which home improvement agency performance has occasionally been criticized – usually due to a failure to meet time targets for processing and delivering adaptations, a key measure of a successful service.

In some areas there are moves to fragment the adaptations service, with casework support being provided by home improvement agencies to help guide people through the process, and a separate service to process the grant and deliver the work managed in-house or by a third party.

One obvious weakness within the sector is that although agencies may deliver adaptations, they are much less likely to be involved strategically in developing and improving services. Partly this reflects the fact that some local authority partners perceive home improvement agencies as solely a mechanism for processing grants, but some home improvement agencies may also be responsible for failing to challenge the view that they cannot contribute in a strategic way. The result is that they might add less value to the delivery of adaptations, remain on the periphery of adaptations policy decisions, and face a greater risk of losing this work.

Without sufficient quantifiable evidence about the benefits of the holistic home improvement agency approach, and when dealing with a process already heavily criticized for its slowness, complexity and the number of different hands involved, home improvement agencies

sometimes have an uphill struggle to convince commissioners that they are a force for the good.

For all of the above reasons, far from being a settled element of the 'predictable' package of home improvement agency services, major adaptations delivery is at the front line of the debate about what defines a Future HIA and how the sector needs to find answers to these challenges.

Why home improvement agency service provision needs to change

Changing the approach to adaptations must address the economic and policy imperatives set out previously.

- Rising demand due to changes in demographics, health and social policy, and expectations of old age and of the ability to maintain independent living at home.
- Reduced public expenditure resulting in an increasing need to find other sources of funding, plus the creativity to look beyond adaptations to find other solutions entirely.
- Better value for money, therefore more scrutiny of the costs of adaptations equipment and the costs of delivering adaptations services.
- More responsive services with better preventative outcomes, with waiting times a key measure of success but longer term outcomes equally important.
- Reduced bureaucracy – leaner processes, reduced officer input on simple, low-cost adaptations.
- A need to demonstrate the preventative benefits of adaptations to other publicly funded services.
- Better links with other support services and one-stop shops.

Now more than ever, home improvement agencies have an obligation to ensure that their involvement in delivering adaptations is necessary and effective. They must prove this through a better understanding and reporting of the outcomes of their adaptations work.

Our research has revealed that positive change is already taking place within and beyond the home improvement agency sector, and the following chapters set out some of the most promising examples.

2. Home improvement agencies and major adaptations policy changes



To track the effect of recent policy changes and measure the current activity of home improvement agencies in delivering major adaptations, this report now presents findings from the following information sources.

- Data collected from the Foundations Electronic Management Information System (FEMIS) which records DFG activity in 140 local authority areas.
- Benchmarking data submitted by home improvement agencies operating in a further 71 local authority areas.
- Sector-wide surveys of DFG activity carried out in September 2008, April 2009 and October 2009.

The questions set within the surveys asked for opinions and ‘best estimates’ as well as data. Therefore, some of the results reflect the views and knowledge of home improvement agency managers and may differ considerably from the formally reported position of many local authorities.

Key findings

Overall level of activity of home improvement agencies in carrying out DFGs

Using FEMIS and benchmarking data, Figure 1 on the next page shows that the proportion of DFG work undertaken by home improvement agencies (as a percentage of the total central government spend) increased from under 35% in 2006/07 to just under 50% in 2007/08 and 2008/09. In figure 1, ‘Allocation’ refers to the proportion of the DFG budget provided by Communities and Local Government (until recently, this was 60% of the total budget for each local authority). The trend apparent from the chart is continuing in the first half of the current financial year.

In 2008/09 home improvement agencies carried out a total of 11,248 DFGs, an increase of 16% from the previous year. The proportion of DFG work carried out by the sector in comparison to other repairs and improvement work also increased significantly in the same period.

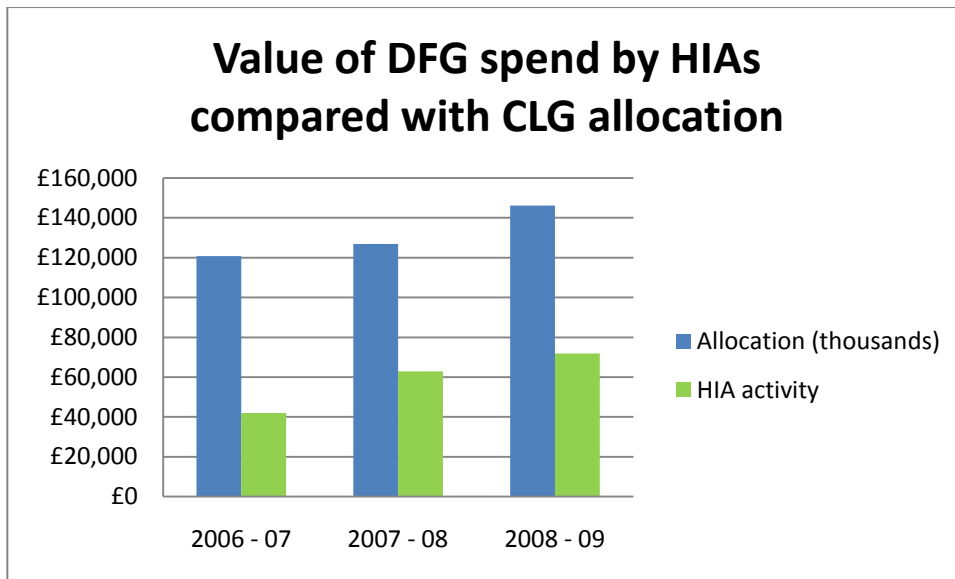


Figure 1

Base: 291 local authority areas

Demand for DFGs

As might be expected given the demographic changes described in Chapter 1, our survey respondents have reported an increase in requests for DFG in most areas. The survey asked for views on levels of demand amongst three age ranges - children (up to 18 years old), adults (to age 64), and older people (aged 65 and over). The results show that demand for adaptations for older people has increased in more areas than for other age groups, with 71% of respondent areas reporting an increase.

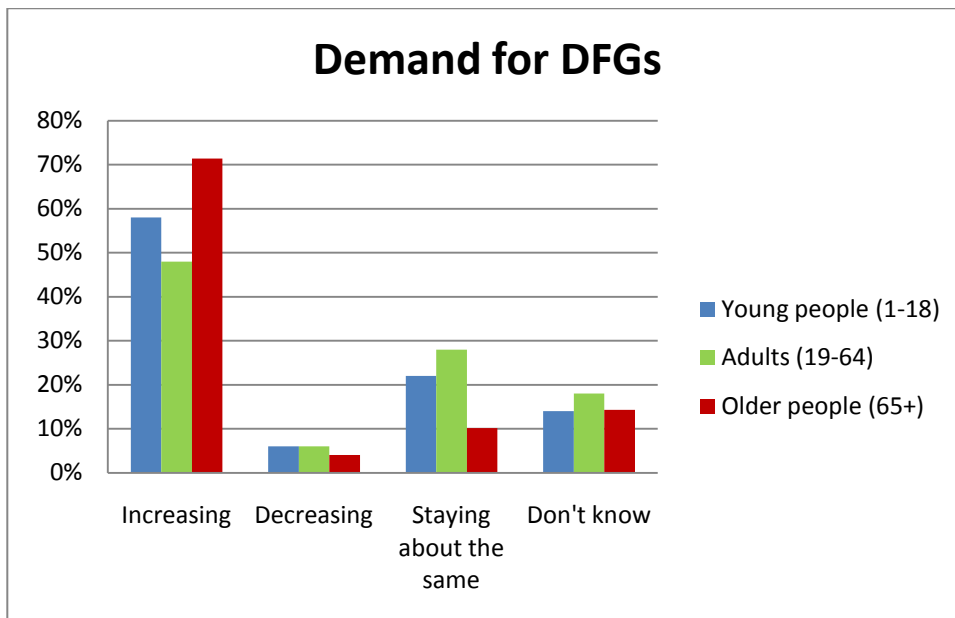


Figure 2

Base: 52 agencies

Average cost of a DFG

Using FEMIS and benchmarking data, the average cost of a DFG undertaken by home improvement agencies in 2008/09 has slightly decreased from £6,646 to £6,396 in comparison with the previous year. This matches the findings of our October 2009 DFG survey in which 63% of respondents felt that the costs of carrying out DFG work had decreased or stayed the same, whereas 34% of respondents felt that the costs had increased a little, and 2% of respondents felt they had increased a lot.

Spend by local authorities on adaptations

In our sector surveys, we asked home improvement agencies to say whether local authority allocations to DFG had increased in 2009/10 in comparison with the previous financial year. The results have been compared with the findings from the October 2008 survey. As shown in Figure 3, this comparison demonstrates that fewer authorities increased their contribution in 2009/10 (down from 31% to 27%), and more are lowering their contribution (up from 12% to 17%). Also, a much larger number of authority areas have not decided their funding levels (or they are at least unknown to the home improvement agency).

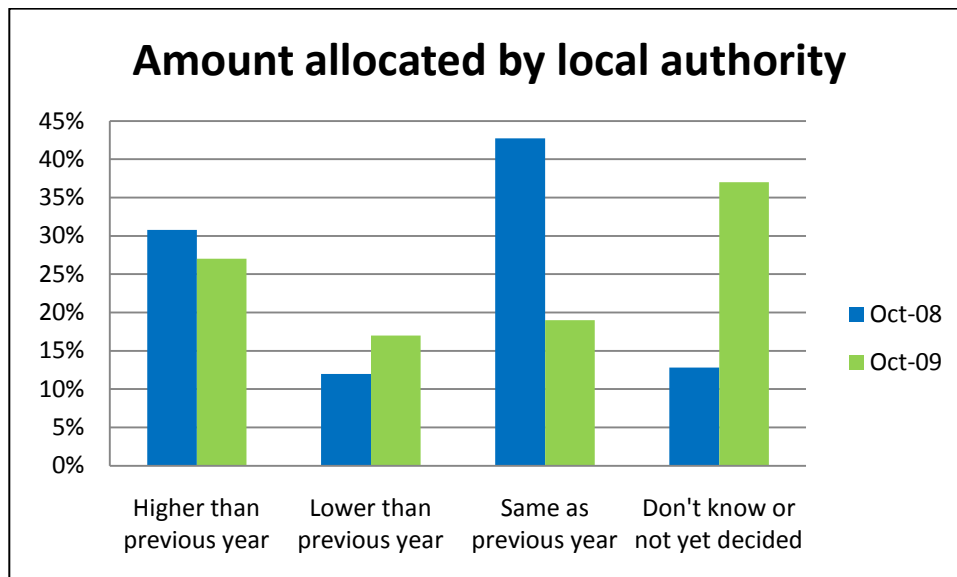


Figure 3

Base: 51 agencies

Spend against budget in 2009/10

Our survey asked about how the budgets available to local authorities were being managed in relation to the high levels of demand for adaptations. We asked agencies to tell us how much of their DFG budget was already spent by October 2009 – halfway through the budget year. The results in Figure 4 show that for survey respondents, nearly one quarter of their authority allocations are already exhausted, with a further 31% significantly over-committed. Only 43% of respondents reported that their authorities have been able to keep their spending within budget limits.

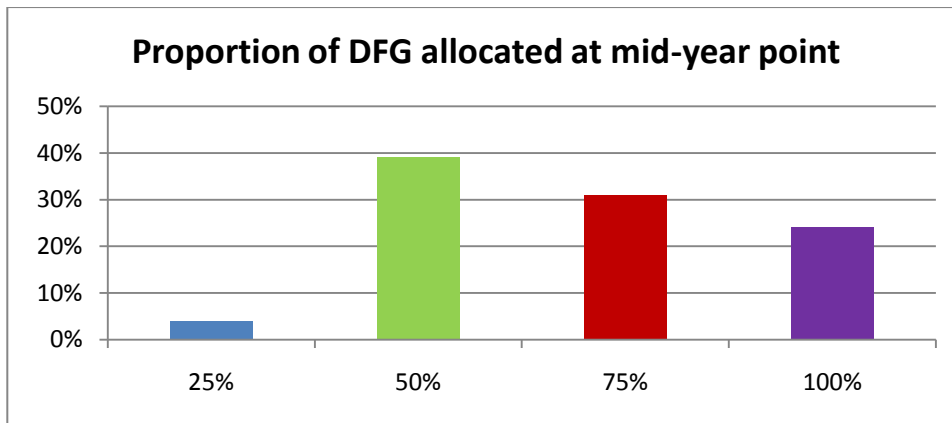


Figure 4

Base: 51 agencies

Waiting times for DFGs

Our October 2009 survey results found more home improvement agencies reporting an increase in waiting times than in October 2008 (see Figure 5).

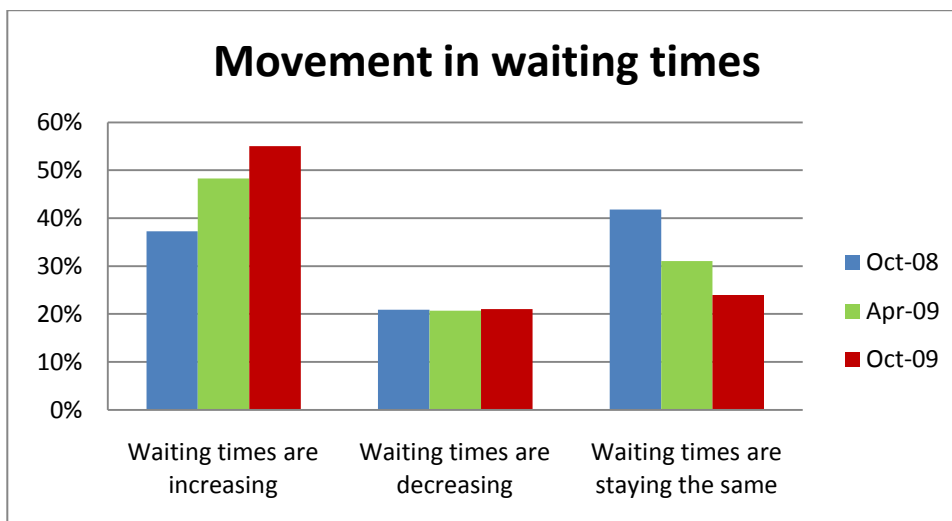


Figure 5

Base: 42 agencies

Some authorities appear to be operating waiting lists for no other reason than lack of funding: a key element of the present dysfunction within adaptations delivery. Several respondents mentioned this trend, with one commenting:

“Reduction in the amount of funding has resulted in LA employing 6 month approval time. Coupled with the long wait for an OT assessment this has significantly increased clients’ waiting time for a DFG.”

To better understand the nature of any possible increase in waiting times, we also examined headline results from the FEMIS database, which records DFG activity in approximately 140 local authority areas. This indicated that the average time from the first enquiry at the home improvement agency to grant approval has remained almost unchanged for the last three years, so if waiting times are increasing, this is most likely to be occurring while clients are waiting for occupational therapy assessment (which is usually before the first enquiry to the agency).

Adaptations for tenants of housing associations

The pressure on local authority DFG budgets due to demand for adaptations from tenants of housing associations was identified as a concern in our surveys. Although the majority of DFGs where home improvement agencies are involved continue to be delivered to clients in the private sector, in the October 2009 survey 70% of responding agencies reported that they are carrying out DFG work for housing association tenants. In some areas, increased demand from the public sector is contributing to the problem of finding resources to meet these needs. Figure 6 shows the proportion of DFG clients by tenure for the last two financial years and the first six months of the current financial year using data collected from FEMIS.

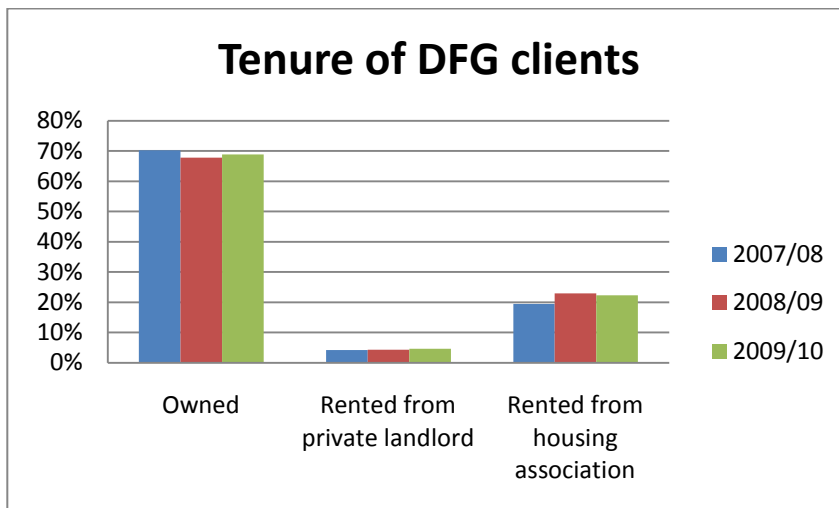


Figure 6

Base: 150 agencies

Rise to £30,000 grant limit

Our survey showed a marked increase in the number of people who agreed that last year's change to a £30,000 grant maximum has put the grant ceiling at about at the right level. Figure 7 shows the trend in opinions expressed in October 2008, April 2009 and October 2009. Significantly fewer people felt that the maximum should be raised, and fewer felt that the increase in the limit has had no noticeable impact.

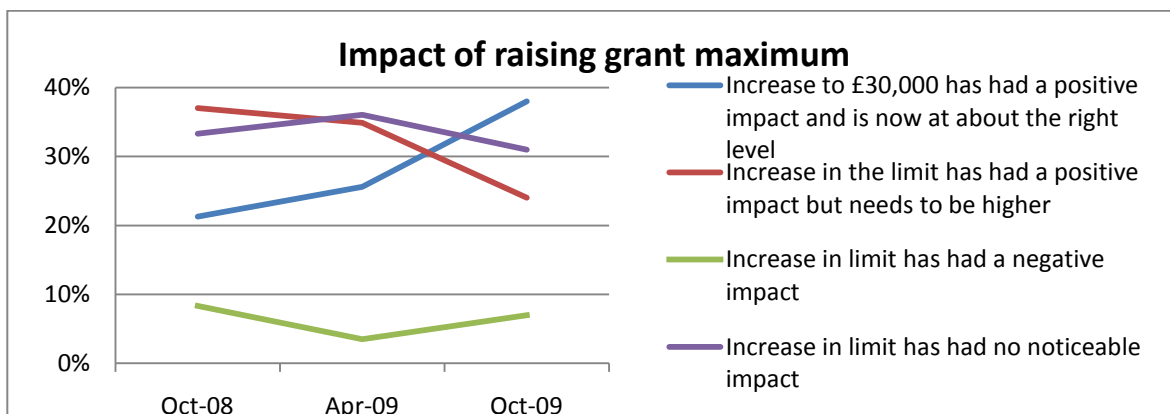


Figure 7

Base: 51 agencies

Charges on grants over £5,000

Results from the three DFG surveys presented in Figure 8 show that the position has reversed on charges being placed on grants over £5,000. In 2008, 36% of respondents confirmed that their authority places a charge on the property for grants over £5,000. This increased to 57% in 2009, with several others noting that this change would be introduced in the next financial year.

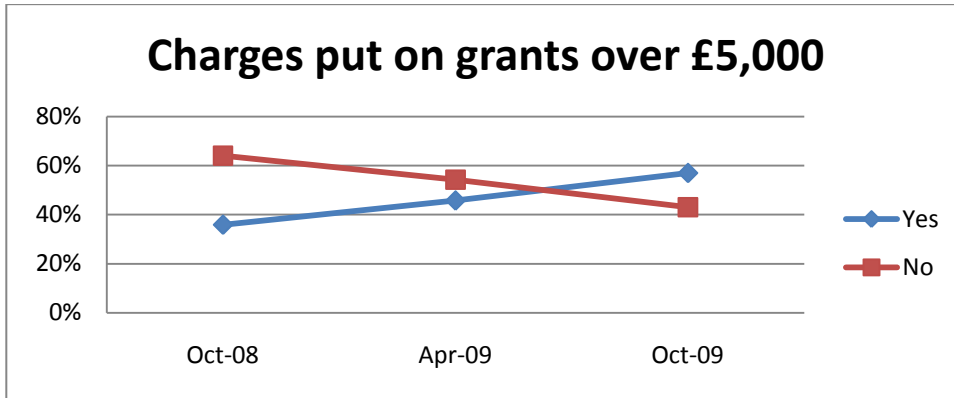


Figure 8

Base: 51 agencies

Conclusions

The results of the DFG surveys and the benchmarking data supplied by the sector show that home improvement agencies are increasingly participating in the delivery of DFG-funded adaptations. Several of the changes to the DFG programme announced in 2007 and 2008 have now matured to the point of being adopted by a majority of authorities. However, concerns about the impact of removing the 60:40 match-funding requirement are growing, with the fear that this will lead to reductions in the overall level of local authority contributions and increased waiting times.

The real concern is for the following financial year, when local authorities faced with drastic 'across the board' budget cuts (several agencies have reported forecast cuts of up to 20%) may slash their contributions to a wide range of public services. Although DFGs are a mandatory form of provision, they are not politically or publicly as high a priority as, for instance, child protection services, so the likely outcome is that the delays and rationing already built into adaptations policies will be exploited more widely and with more damaging effects to protect smaller amounts of funding.

3. Getting the most from budgets



Home improvement agencies can help local authorities get the most from their adaptations budgets, particularly if those adaptations form part of a wider service. A holistic approach to the assessment process can lead to an alternative solution being identified which is cheaper to the public purse, more acceptable to the client, and in line with the recent changes and flexibility introduced to the DFG programme. Inflexible approaches to using major adaptations as the 'only solution' to a situation can be wasteful.

Adaptations should be viewed as part of wider toolkit of options including:

- moving to more suitable or specially adapted accommodation
- the provision of rapid repairs by handypersons
- telecare and community equipment, and
- loan funding and equity release schemes to enable people to choose more comprehensive adaptations or improvements to their homes to meet their individual needs.

This chapter looks at ways of stretching adaptations resources. It explores efficiencies and cost savings which can be achieved through improving processes, better procurement practices, and re-using and recycling adaptations equipment.

Recycling equipment

Some of the most innovative work carried out by home improvement agencies in adaptations concerns their attempts to get more value out of existing adaptations budgets through recycling equipment. The following case study was first mentioned in the National HIA Awards entries for 2008, and since being publicised a number of other agencies have adopted similar approaches.

Recycling equipment - Mendip and Bath and North East Somerset Care & Repair

This initiative came about almost by chance because a staff member in the agency noticed how service users sometimes died soon after having an adaptation completed. This was a particular point for service users receiving stairlifts – “what a waste of hardly used equipment”.

As a result, Kevin Lake, the Director, considered how stairlifts could be recycled. He identified that extra funding would be needed and approached the National Lottery. The project started with an advertisement and press release in the local paper. A number of key factors came into play:

- Being able to offer cut-price as well as new stairlifts provoked a lot of interest. Soon people were contacting the agency and donating equipment.
- Other equipment was also donated, such as adjustable beds, scooters, wheel frames and other walking frames. Ensuring an effective system of steam-cleaning and disinfecting the equipment meant it was able to be offered to service users at a much reduced cost, sometimes less than half price.

The agency soon needed more space to clean and store the volume of second-hand equipment they were receiving. The warehouse next door to their office came up for rent, and they were able to persuade the landlord to rent it to the agency and provide the basic building work to turn the warehouse into a showroom. This enabled the agency to display a range of equipment that potential service users could try out before deciding what would work best for them.

The success of the project enabled the agency to negotiate directly with three major suppliers of stairlifts. This had two benefits – firstly the manufacturers were willing to supply replacement parts for the second-hand equipment where needed, and secondly it allowed the agency to become an authorised dealer for the suppliers. As a result the agency was able to display and supply a range of different options - from second-hand stairlifts to three different makes of new stairlift. All at reduced cost. In addition, there was a range of different equipment for service users to choose from and all could be tried out first to see if it was the right choice.

A key result of this was a dramatic reduction in waiting times. If a piece of equipment was in stock it could be supplied and fitted within a week. Local authorities recognised that the agency could supply stairlifts at a much reduced cost. Further, the agency had a large range of products to supply the best option for the individual service user, often with a choice between new and used equipment. The result was that the local authorities agreed that the agency did not need to go through a tendering process and usually received the order direct, with a further cost reduction as a result. The speed of response was another important factor, with the agency able to respond within days rather than months.

In the years since the scheme has been running, due to the speed and low cost of the equipment, in many cases clients, or the clients’ families, have opted to fund the equipment themselves rather than go through the DFG route, although a DFG is always offered if appropriate. As a result the agency calculates that there has been a saving of approximately £400,000 to the DFG budget since the scheme started.

Encouraging the re-use of adapted accommodation by disabled people

The ultimate form of adaptations recycling is to promote the re-use of pre-adapted or purpose-built accessible housing within the community by people who need such facilities. A number of local authorities have used their occupational therapy services to inspect and classify all social housing so that when it becomes available for re-let, the accessible features of the property can be advertised and people who need accessible housing are invited to apply. Such registers of disabled accommodation could be developed in the private sector as well, and home improvement agencies may be well positioned to set these registers up and hold information about accessible properties where no other such services exist.

An example of the classification system used within accessible housing registers can be found within the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea's 'choice based lettings' website⁸.

Getting a better price – the benefits of supply-chain management

Most local authorities and home improvement agencies work in isolation from each other to deliver DFGs. As a result, they may not have considered the possibility of obtaining better prices by purchasing adaptations equipment in bulk.

We know that a large proportion of DFG expenditure on lower value cases involves standard equipment which would be well suited to bulk purchasing arrangements. For instance Foundations' research for Government Office East Midlands⁹ found that within that region, 34% of all adaptations in the private sector were stairlifts. Across all tenures nearly 900 stairlifts were installed throughout the region during the year 2006/07. However, many smaller district authorities within the region were responsible for only a few dozen and would have been unable to secure cost savings from bulk orders.

The following case study gives an example of how cost savings from regional or national joint procurement partnerships have been achieved.

⁸ http://www.homeconnections.org.uk/RBKC/PDF/Accessible_Housing_Register_Categories2.pdf

⁹ *A Review of Demand for Disabled Facilities Grant in the East Midlands*, Foundations, 2008

Collective procurement – Fusion 21 and Northern Housing Consortium

Some authorities have joined together to develop a framework agreement with Fusion 21, a social economy business formed by a group of large social landlords to collectively procure equipment, in particular stairlifts. As a result, partners have achieved significant quality improvements and purchasing savings of up to 30%. The advantage is that the partners can demonstrate value for money on all items in terms of cost and delivery timescales.

Partner authorities pay Fusion 21 a fee to jointly negotiate procurement on their behalf. When equipment is required, each partner authority can approach the appropriate firm from a number of possible suppliers. By quoting a reference number, they know they will be guaranteed delivery at a set price and within a set timescale preferential to that available to other customers.

As a first step towards obtaining better value in their procurement of adaptations, home improvement agencies (and their local authorities) should investigate benchmarking costs with neighbouring agencies and districts. They should then consider the scope for entering existing collective procurement partnerships and consortia or forming their own with their neighbours.

Using powers and flexibilities within the Regulatory Reform Order

Some authorities have undertaken extensive reform of their funding rules and policies relating to adaptations, implementing changes which have been possible since the 60:40 match-funding rule was removed, as well as using their powers under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order (RRO) to full advantage, as shown in the following case study.

Flexible use of funding – Rochdale Borough Council Home Improvement Agency

Since the RRO was introduced, Rochdale Home Improvement Agency, part of the local authority, has been able to shape policy to allow innovative ways of delivering additional help to people requiring major adaptations. Over the years, Rochdale has made incremental changes to its grants and assistance policies after listening to feedback from staff, customers and partners.

A Disabled Relocation Assistance scheme has been introduced to assist people who need major adaptations but whose current property is unsuitable to adapt. This offers a package of up to £30,000 to assist people to move to more suitable property that has been assessed by the occupational therapist and technical staff as meeting the disability need.

Equity release loans for owner-occupiers, developed in partnership with the Regenda Group, are available to help customers who can't afford the means test contribution or the contribution when the costs of work exceeds the grant maximum. The loan is registered as a charge on the property, and there are no weekly or monthly repayments - which means that the customer does not have the worry of any additional outgoings.

Most recently, since the removal of the 60:40 funding split, applications for adaptations work under £5,000 in value have ceased to be dealt with using the DFG process. Instead they are

dealt with by the council's Disabled Home Repairs Assistance grant, using local authority funding which would previously been allocated to the DFG as match funding. This means that a much more streamlined process can be followed with proportionate checks and balances to ensure that straightforward lower value adaptations are dealt with efficiently.

4. Improving adaptations processes



In some local authorities, an over-complex process has built up around the delivery of adaptations - not through a need to comply with any specific legislative requirement but because different sets of professionals have developed ways of working in isolation which suit “their bit of the process” while creating delays and other inefficiencies.

Some home improvement agencies and in-house authority adaptations services have shown it is possible to take an in-depth look at processes, analyse the current working methods, and then design a more streamlined system which greatly benefits end users as well as reducing officer time and other unnecessary costs.

Benchmarking the adaptations process

Benchmarking usually starts with a comparison of quantitative data, such as costs and waiting times for adaptations – known as ‘performance’ or ‘metric’ benchmarking. This can help organisations identify how their performance differs from that of other organisations and how it has changed over time, and can act as a spur to improving performance. Adaptations benchmarking might start with comparing the main outputs (for example, number of adaptations) with other agencies working in a similar environment.

Performance benchmarking uncovers differences which can then be investigated further using ‘process’ benchmarking, which is the systematic analysis and comparison of the processes used to deliver services. By thoroughly understanding the business processes involved, it is possible to re-engineer these to obtain efficiencies.

The processes usually involved in an adaptations case are broken down as fields within FEMIS and are given in Appendix 1.

One group of local authorities, the Urban Renewal Officers Group (UROG) (see the box on the next page) has taken part in benchmarking adaptations delivery. This has led to performance improvements for partner organisations and a number of best practice approaches to working which can be emulated by local authorities and home improvement agencies elsewhere.

Urban Renewal Officers Group (UROG)

UROG is made up of a number of local authorities which have an interest in the development and delivery of private sector renewal strategy.

A group of 17 authorities, all single-tier but ranging from large cities such as Bristol, Birmingham and Nottingham to metropolitan authorities such as Rochdale, Bury and St. Helens and including a London Borough, Southwark, have joined together to form UROG, which operates as a best practice group, sharing expertise and good ideas.

The group also operates as a benchmarking club to challenge each other's practice and has looked at four areas in detail so far: Disabled Facilities Grants, adaptations, value for money (VfM) and urban clearance.

One of UROG's members from St. Helens Borough Council has provided an illustration below of how the practice of benchmarking services can make fundamental improvements to adaptations performance.

St. Helens: process benchmarking and establishing service standards for adaptations

Approaching the task

- St. Helens broke down their adaptations process into four key stages or levels.
- Each stage was then broken down into very specific tasks and timescales, and targets were established for key tasks which had the potential to hold up other activities.
- Regular supervision was established to ensure that individual staff members were keeping to their targets.

As a result, St. Helens was able to measure their overall performance in detail and then set targets to improve year on year.

The results

The latest figures demonstrate that 94% of adaptations were completed within the target timescales. The other key result is that each stage of the process is allocated to and dealt with by appropriate levels of staff, freeing the most senior and professionally qualified staff to focus upon the complex cases where their knowledge and expertise is best utilised.

How the adaptations process now works

Level 1 - All initial contacts and referrals are handled through customer services officers. These are passed on to the assessment officer who makes contact with the service user and establishes the nature, priority and urgency of each referral. Cases which require no further action or simple adaptations such as grab rails or the allocation of minor equipment can be authorised. Level 1 amounts to some 10% of all referrals. All other referrals go forward for a more detailed assessment.

Level 2 is defined as where the applicant has no difficulties other than bathing. A ‘bath bus’, which is a van loaded with a range of types of bath aids that can be tried in an individual service user’s own home, visits the applicant. Many service users find they can adequately cope with a bath aid rather than being referred for a more complex (and costly) intervention such as a level-access shower. Targets established for Level 2 mean that all referrals are contacted within three working days, and that the ‘bath bus’ will visit within four weeks. This response is far faster than waiting for an adaptation and accounts for 11% of all referrals.

Level 3 is defined as where the service user is experiencing difficulties in more than one area, but these are likely to result in providing non-complex adaptations such as ramps or straightforward level-access showers. The majority of referrals are dealt with at this level and an occupational therapy assistant oversees most of the assessments. At this level, referrals are contacted within three working days and the assessment is completed within 10 weeks. However, high priority assessments can be completed within 48 hours.

Finally, **Level 4** represents the most complex situations, and assessments are completed by qualified occupational therapists. Although qualified occupational therapists oversee all levels and can advise on any assessment, the allocation of less complex work to other staff with very specific training to undertake the task has resulted in improved timescales for assessment and completion at every level.

Closer working between different sets of professionals

One key point within the good practice guidance issued by Communities and Local Government in 2006¹⁰ has been verified by several agencies contacted during the course of this research. In our previous research on demand for DFGs in the East Midlands¹¹, local authority respondents were asked to indicate how delays in the system could be addressed, and several stressed the importance of co-locating occupational therapists within grant officer teams or, where a home improvement agency operates, inside the agency. This improves communication and shared understanding of the detail of the process, enabling these professionally qualified staff to focus on the aspects of adaptations that really require their skills. This was described by one survey respondent as “the biggest single factor in improving performance”.

Several home improvement agencies are managing to reduce the pressure on occupational therapists by using staff who have undergone trusted assessor or trusted technician training to enable them to both assess and fit lower level adaptations. Agencies have opted to pursue this using several different approaches – some have trained caseworkers as trusted assessors, while others now use handyperson operatives who can assess for as well as fit minor adaptations. Others have trained staff as occupational therapy assistants. There is also evidence that the commissioning of minor adaptations services has picked up on these developments, with some now asking for providers to have trusted assessors within their delivery teams.

¹⁰ *Delivering Housing Adaptations for Disabled People: A Good Practice Guide*, Communities and Local Government, 2006

¹¹ *A Review of Demand for Disabled Facilities Grant in the East Midlands*, Foundations, 2008

Working within a two-tier system

A two-tier system of local government, where there is a county council and district councils, creates a more complex and potentially more difficult system around adaptations. Home improvement agencies operating in just one district authority can be compromised by having to satisfy the requirements of a single grants department which may operate policies that are inconsistent with others in the county. A county council provides the occupational therapist assessment across several districts, but in some instances can also become inconsistent in the course of meeting differing requirements of district council grants departments.

Some home improvement agencies operate across a number of districts but have been unable to take a lead in improving consistency of adaptations delivery. Therefore, they operate in a similarly fragmented and inconsistent way. However, some have been able to overcome this, and there are a number of common factors that enable them to achieve this. Most important of these is the requirement to develop trust and co-operation between all the stakeholders.

Developing links across a county – Three Rivers' experience

Three Rivers Housing Association, operating in County Durham, has been a participant for several years in a county HIA forum. This forum was originally set up by the county Supporting People team to look at achieving county-wide coverage at a point when only three out of seven districts had agencies. When this objective was achieved, the group agreed to remain in operation to develop more consistent and higher quality home improvement agency services across the county. Other members of the group included representatives from adult social services, the primary care trust, district council grant officers and the county's occupational therapy team. The forum members fed into reviews of the adaptations policy which helped to greatly improve consistency across the county.

When Durham became a unitary authority last year, the HIA forum acted as a consultative group for the proposed realignment of services, and has been one of the main points of reference when other changes, including the development of a single handyman service, were discussed and planned. The main advantage of the forum is that the regular meetings between all parties have built up a good habit of staying in touch, with face-to-face contact helping to build rapport and establish mutual trust and understanding.

Strategic working - the advantages of working across several district authorities

Small home improvement agencies can and do deliver excellent adaptations services. However, research for this report suggests that an important factor in establishing a home improvement agency as a credible and sustainable partner in the delivery of adaptations is size, and in the case of two-tier authorities, the capacity to deliver adaptations across several district authority areas. This enables dedicated staff to be employed to provide a wider range of functions, such as developing effective performance management systems. Such a staff focus is a luxury that usually cannot be achieved in smaller agencies.

A larger organisation also has the advantage of better purchasing power. Contractors don't wish to damage that relationship and risk losing business. A larger agency is able to establish the best deals with contractors and suppliers and speed up delivery of service. All this leads to jobs being completed more quickly and at less cost. Where there is a need for urgent adaptations the agency is able to use those effective working relationships with contractors and district authority staff to dramatically cut the completion times of jobs.

Strength in size and numbers - Lincolnshire Home Improvement Agency

Covering a bigger patch enabled Lincolnshire Home Improvement Agency to work in partnership with larger organisations such as the County Fire and Rescue Service¹². Such agreements are possible because of the much larger population of vulnerable people the agency is in contact with. This in turn means that individual partners are less able to make unreasonable demands on the agency.

Working in partnership is very important to the agency and partnership meetings are used to establish shared targets amongst commissioning partners from the beginning. In this way it has been possible to achieve some commonality without damaging local diversity. The agency is a member of the Lincolnshire Housing Forum¹³ which the agency chief executive uses to raise the profile of home improvement agencies overall and to ensure the agency's role as a strategic partner.

Using the size of their service user group, the Lincolnshire agency has established a strong status. The agency is listened to and, as a direct result, has built up two key strategic advantages.

- The agency is able to persuade commissioning partners to agree to pilot projects of new ways of working – using one district as a pilot and, if it works, rolling out across the county.
- Working with commissioning partners to develop a county-wide standard of work. This provides consistency across the county and a resultant reduction in costs. There is the potential to take this further by negotiating a block contract with a contractor to, for example, refurbish bathrooms across the county to a given standard. In this way, standards can be assured and improved whilst costs can be reduced.

¹² Lincolnshire Home Improvement Agency has established a service level agreement with Lincolnshire Fire and Rescue Service to promote the use of Smoke Alarms and other safety devices.

¹³ The Lincolnshire Housing Forum is a sub-regional group of statutory housing authorities, county council representatives, housing providers and other stakeholders.

5. Moving from a provider-led to a user-led process



Currently, some agencies and local authorities avoid advertising the availability of grants towards adaptations. The reason given is that they cannot meet existing demand, therefore it doesn't make sense to generate more demand: advertising the service would only raise expectations that cannot be met. There is also a series of hurdles to overcome once potential clients are made aware of the possibility of a DFG. Typical scenarios include:

- use of Fair Access to Care Services (FACS) charging criteria to limit access to assessment by an occupational therapist to those in highest 'critical' needs band, and
- waiting lists for assessment or for processing grants for cases judged to be lower priority.

These practices are about funding and are not a result of inadequate numbers of staff and unmanageable workloads, although bottlenecks in the system still occur for those reasons as well. While authorities may believe it is right to use such methods to ration scarce resources, the end result is an ineffective system which cannot deliver a preventative response and is therefore in opposition to current health and social care policy objectives.

Waiting for a DFG must feel like being in a long tunnel for many clients – once they get sucked in, placed in a queue and told to wait, they continue in a state of darkness, hoping for the solution promised at the start of the journey, but unaware of other options which might exist. The lack of open information about scarcity of funding, and an honest appraisal of how long they might have to wait, deprives vulnerable people of the opportunity to decide for themselves how to find a solution which best meets their needs.

Home improvement agencies providing a client-led service

The real strength of home improvement agency delivery of adaptations is that they always aim to adopt a holistic, client-centred approach.

Many seeking to improve the delivery of adaptations point to the need for a streamlined process that focuses on installing adaptations efficiently in the shortest time possible. Several local authorities have cited home improvement agencies' failure to deliver adaptations on time as a reason to take DFG work in-house. But let us consider why this might be happening.

- An agency should always work to find funding based around the preferred solution for the client rather than work a solution round the available funding.
- An agency's holistic approach will draw in other services to meet other housing needs which usually exist alongside the need for a major adaptation. The client might be given help to have other work go ahead first, perhaps a rewire or a structural repair.

This means that the adaptation work paid for by a DFG can take a little longer to complete. However, there is a compelling argument about the need for greater speed and simplicity, particularly in the case of smaller, standard adaptations such as stairlifts and level-access showers, and we support the theory that it is possible to separate and streamline these types of adaptations from more major work. The policy, process and funding decisions around achieving this will have to be developed and agreed by agencies and their local authority partners. The cost, checking and officer time involved in new processes must be proportionate to level of spend on the adaptation work and equipment to be installed.

Needs assessment and housing options advice

The Future HIA report *Support for Choice* emphasises the need for good-quality holistic housing advice services. Home improvement agencies can provide holistic needs assessments and offer advice covering a range of options, and then provide assistance to deliver those options. The best option for individuals usually involves the least work and the smallest disruption to their lives, so the home improvement agency may find itself in the position of having to argue the point with other professionals that a more simple solution is the best answer, possibly that a 'non-adaptation' option is the best solution for their client.

Adaptations services to be considered as part of a range of related services and solutions

The most important change needed in adaptations is to abandon a monolithic DFG-centred approach and find ways of broadening the choices for clients, possibly reducing the cost to the public purse at the same time. An example might be to offer financial and practical assistance in moving house rather than undertaking an expensive adaptation. Another might be to provide a series of smaller property modifications, such as grab rails or bathing aids, rather than the disruption and cost of stripping out a whole bathroom to provide barrier-free bathing facilities.

The Future HIA will provide many services which complement major adaptations delivery.

- Handyperson
- Home safety and security checks
- Minor adaptations
- Major repairs and improvements
- Housing options, information and advice
- Benefit checks and income maximization.

If the agency does not provide this broad range of services, they will be working in partnership with other service providers who can offer them.

Personalised procurement

The best argument for the added value a home improvement agency can offer is that its approach is all about personalisation.

A large amount of support would need to be provided to people who find themselves in charge of carrying out a major adaptation in their home. One respondent in the recent evaluation of individual budgets¹⁴ commented:

“The general view from the DFG team and ours is, because of the complexity of builders and all the rest of it, [...] it’s highly unlikely that anybody would want the cash and would want to sort it out for themselves.”

A common misconception of the personalisation agenda is that people would be left to manage all the elements of procuring and managing a service without any help. The challenge comes in offering the help needed while still allowing the disabled person to take the important decisions based on a range of options and expert advice.

There is scope for home improvement agencies to extend their existing advocacy role to help support vulnerable people to make the right choice about adaptations and aids. Personalisation will lead to greater commercial interest in the adaptations market, with private companies potentially competing with home improvement agencies to design and build people’s property adaptations, for which they will be able to charge a fee. All agencies need to consider how their current service offering may need to change. Two elements are uppermost.

- Agencies may need to approach adaptations work with a clear understanding of their market, the role they will play, and what they will charge.
- Agencies will need a well-defined strategy for how they intend to reach that market.

The role of the home improvement agency technical officer

The technical offer is a unique asset to home improvement agencies in their delivery of major adaptations. Throughout the process of a major adaptation the technical officer’s most important role is one of advocate for the client, explaining complex issues in simple terms so that the client has a full understanding of the various options and can make informed choices.

It would be difficult to find such a distinct range of knowledge and skills assembled in one individual except in a home improvement agency. The technical officer will take on the following essential elements of the adaptations process.

- Options appraisal - at an early stage when housing options are being considered, the technical officer can explain what adaptations are possible, linking them to the assessment made by an occupational therapist, as well as clarifying the grant application and approval process.

¹⁴ Evaluation of the Individual Budgets Pilot Programme, Individual Budgets Evaluation Network (IBSEN), 2008

- **Liaison with occupational therapists and grant officers.** Always putting forward the client's point of view, seeking to negotiate agreement with others about the work to be undertaken.
- **Design and specification of work.** This may be passed to others such as architects, or technical officers may have the necessary skills to do this themselves. In either case, the technical officer manages this process and ensures that the design matches the client's expectations.
- **Developing a pool of reliable contractors.** Putting quality assurance measures in place, ensuring that contractors understand the needs of the client, and making provision where necessary for the vulnerability of the client or for the cultural needs of the client.
- **Drawing up contracts.** Formalising the working relationships between all the parties, ensuring that all relevant building, health and safety and CDM regulations are adhered to during the course of the work.
- **Project management.** Active management of the work once it is in progress, particularly when several different contractors are involved, ensuring that the work is only signed off once the client is completely satisfied.

By specialising in the delivery of adaptations, home improvement agency technical officers develop a thorough understanding of building regulations affecting adaptations work (in particular Part M of the regulations which covers building access requirements). This is why housing associations and other social landlords have started employing home improvement agencies to deliver adaptations, even though they already employ their own technical officers who work predominantly in the field of responsive and planned repairs and maintenance.

Research has shown that adaptations are often not used because of an inadequate specification to meet the client's needs, lack of consultation with the client, or poor-quality implementation of the work¹⁵. With so much potential for things to go wrong, it is very important that home improvement agencies can offer a high level of expertise through their technical officers.

¹⁵ *Money well spent: the effectiveness and value of housing adaptations*, Heywood, 2001

6. Demonstrating the value of adaptations to health and care commissioners



With reductions in public funding likely, the need to make a demonstrable link between low-cost housing interventions and reduced upstream health and care costs is uppermost in many providers' and commissioners' minds.

Health funding has been particularly hard to access for agencies delivering adaptations. One respondent of our DFG Survey in October 2009 summed up the frustration felt by many:

“We already had a backlog of DFGs [...] This is having an enormous effect on disabled people and their carers and with prevention being on the governments agenda, it's not good enough. Why doesn't health contribute to the DFG pot?”

One problem facing agencies is that with increasing pressures on health and care services, it is an uphill struggle trying to encourage transfer of resources away from acute into preventative services.

However, more recently government policy has moved towards greater integration between housing, health and care services, and there is increased focus on the need to provide care “close to home”. There is now a stronger opportunity to make a case for the effectiveness of housing adaptations, but as always we require a more definitive evidential link between housing interventions and health and care outcomes than currently exists.

This chapter examines how Future HIAs can add to the weight of evidence by undertaking better systematic monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of their housing interventions, such as adaptations work. It also gives details of some current initiatives which show progress being made in building a case for increased investment by health and social care budget holders, the main beneficiaries of the cost savings.

Adaptations - the balance between outputs and outcomes

Most benchmarking of performance in adaptations delivery is based around key milestone and output measurement – for example, response times at various stages of the process, quantities and quality of adaptation. However, the Supporting People programme has promoted a more balanced view of the effectiveness of the services, based not on outputs but on a range of outcomes for service users. Many worthwhile outcomes of home improvement agency services

are not quantifiable in terms of meaningful outputs; for instance, many actions involve giving advice and support, rather than making changes to the physical fabric of the home.

Outcomes monitoring

The development of an outcomes framework specific to home improvement agencies gives scope for agencies to build up a base of evidence to support future funding bids. The five high-level outcomes remain the same as the general Supporting People Outcomes Framework ('economic wellbeing', 'be healthy', 'enjoy and achieve', 'stay safe' and 'make a positive contribution'), but the indicators which sit underneath these have been amended to reflect the work of home improvement agencies.

Using the framework, outcomes can be reported for a proportion of clients who are supported by home improvement agency services. The suggested sample sizes of 30% for core work cases and 10% for handyperson cases can accurately represent the outcomes achieved without imposing too onerous an administrative task.

The decision to use the framework as a contractual reporting requirement will be made by individual commissioning authorities, but from the outset we have encouraged agencies to use the framework for their own purposes. At a national level, we are encouraged by the number of agencies which are choosing to record outcome information. Data from the FEMIS database, which records home improvement agency activity in 219 local authority areas (approximately two thirds of the sector) shows that from April to November 2009, outcomes for 9,239 clients were recorded by 150 home improvement agencies. Major adaptations are recorded under the 'be healthy' high-level outcome, within the indicator "*Did the client need help to better manage their physical health or mental health?*" Around one third of clients (3,044) were recorded in this category and, of those, 701 needed a major adaptation. This outcome was achieved for 540 of these 701 clients.

Besides providing better information about adaptations work being carried out and crucial information to explain why outcomes have not been achieved in some cases, the outcomes framework demonstrates how the holistic approach of home improvement agencies adds value by providing a range of other positive outcomes while working with the client on a major adaptation. For instance, of the 540 successful major adaptations outcomes, 68 received help to maximise their income, 35 were given help to establish contact with external groups or services, 28 were given help to establish contact with friends or family, 80 were given help to keep their home safe or more secure or reduce the fear of crime, and 10 were given help to reduce the risk of harm from others.

Longer term outcomes monitoring

Strengthening the evidence base for the effectiveness of adaptations services may require monitoring outcomes longer term for home improvement agency clients. One obstacle to recording and monitoring such outcomes is the short-term nature of most engagement with home improvement agency clients. The costs of maintaining contact with clients for longer might be prohibitive if the only purpose behind this is to confirm that the initial outcomes are being maintained and the client is still living independently.

However, a number of agencies are developing new service models which create the opportunity to gather this information while offering other (paid for) services. These include:

- annual property maintenance services for homeowners, which involve property ‘health checks’, small repairs and other remedial action where required
- annual handyperson service contracts where a yearly charge entitles clients to low-cost repeat visits, and
- gardening contracts which, again, require return visits to clients every season to maintain their gardens.

‘Invest to Save’ model of adaptations – Warwickshire County Council

The adult services team in Warwickshire County Council has developed a method for re-charging the costs of adaptations delivery to other budgets in health and social care. In Warwickshire, there are waiting lists for adaptations in several of the district councils. Interest developed in exploring the potential to save money within adult social care budgets by carrying out adaptations more quickly. This has been achieved by looking at individuals on the adaptations waiting list and carrying out a calculation which assesses:

- the cost of the care package required without adaptations
- the cost of the care package required with adaptations
- the cost of the adaptation required
- any actual cost saving (based on expenses incurred up until the point where the adaptation would otherwise have been carried out), and
- the potential cost saving (based on expenses likely to be incurred in future).

Although at an early stage, the model has the support of colleagues across housing, health and care, and could achieve a broader appreciation of the real cost and potential savings of adaptations delivery. The model may only be effective for one in 10 people who need a disabled adaptation, but it is an important step forward in creating a formal funding link between adaptations and the beneficiaries of their savings in social care and health.

Establishing a financial health value for housing interventions – Research for 4NW

Research undertaken by Warwick Law School with the Building Research Establishment (BRE) for 4NW (the Regional Leaders Board for the North West) has sought to place a financial health value on housing interventions undertaken under the Decent Homes programme. Recently completed work by the BRE developed a method that provided the means to compare the cost of housing interventions with the potential savings to health services¹⁶. This has been used in the research for 4NW.

¹⁶ *The Real Cost of Poor Housing*, Davidson M, Roys M, Nicol S, Ormandy D, and Ambrose P, 2009

The first phase of the research focused on the health impact of identifying and removing hazards under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. However, there are plans to develop the same methodology to include other forms of housing intervention such as major adaptations.

In basic terms, the method uses robust data gathered from international studies of the health impacts of various housing hazards to generate a financial health value associated with removing or mitigating the hazard. Looking at adaptations purely in this 'deficit' manner, one can calculate a preventative value to various types of work based on the known costs of dealing with falls, hip fractures, hospital stays, increased dependency on personal care, and so on. It might be harder to use this method to calculate the 'positive' lifestyle benefits of increased mobility and wellbeing which adaptations also achieve, but this project has provoked interest and involvement from health professionals in the region and shows a good deal of promise.

Investing in healthy outcomes – Blackpool's adaptations approach

The approach taken towards adaptations by Blackpool and its in-house home improvement agency represents a significant move towards linking the preventative outcomes of adaptations to potential reductions in health and social care costs.

2009/10 saw Blackpool Council working alongside NHS Blackpool to carry out a major review of the delivery of adaptations, right from the initial request for help through to completion. The review team was made up of a mix of senior managers from Care & Repair, Adult Social Care, Occupational Therapy and the Council's Building Services along with practitioners from all the sectors. The result has been to radically reduce the end-to-end time for clients coming through the system and put them firmly back into the centre of the process.

Blackpool have used their DFG allocation (as well as additional funding from Health and Social Care) to carry out the work, using the freedoms given to councils under the Regulatory Reform Order and the relaxing of the DFG ringfence as the basis of doing the work differently. A flexible system approach has evolved with occupational therapists and technical staff encouraged to think inventively, a much-reduced grant assessment process, and common conceptions and practices challenged. It is underpinned by regular liaison across all levels to discuss cases and solutions. Working differently to provide adaptations will continue with the lessons learnt taken forward and new approaches tested and developed.

It is important to appreciate that the substantial changes in the way that major adaptations are organised are part of a much wider preventative strategy adopted through a partnership between the health authority, the local authority and the home improvement agency. NHS Blackpool's analysis of the causes of poor life expectancy in the authority highlighted that falls were a major cause of hospital admission, ill health and premature death, costing ambulance time, affecting the capacity of community nursing, and increasing residential and nursing home costs.

A review of existing service provision identified that high-risk housebound people were excluded from the local falls prevention programmes that targeted medium-risk mobile patients. International evidence on effective interventions led to the following interventions being commissioned in association with, or through, Blackpool Care & Repair.

- Development of an enhanced Blackpool Decent Homes standard so that all new-build homes and refurbishment of RSL housing include consideration of accident prevention.
- Joint training between agencies on falls, accident prevention, fuel poverty and home security so that all frontline workers entering the home of a vulnerable adult are thinking beyond their own remit to identify hazards, reduce accidents and hospital admissions.
- Using the nationally developed Housing Health and Safety Ratings System hazards assessment so that a range of grass-roots workers are able to identify vulnerable people living in high-risk environments.
- SEASHORE Home and Health check, a service established to make changes to the environment following a hazards assessment. Care & Repair deliver the SEASHORE project that takes the form of a full environmental home safety check including risk factors for falls and fires. All staff are trained to undertake falls risk assessments and refer into the falls service. Interventions and practical measures include hand and grab rails, minor adaptations, security and falls prevention measures, draught-proofing, fitting smoke alarms, and replacing old or defective electric blankets. Health promotion information and advice on self-care is also provided as part of the service.

NHS Blackpool has seen a reduction in hospital admissions from falls since adopting the above approaches. The reduction in admissions for the 2006/07 compared to 2005/06 (the date from which falls-related admissions were recorded) has saved £104,000 and has increased each year.

All the above initiatives are examples of the commitment shown within leading authorities and home improvement agencies to proving the wider benefits of housing adaptations across health and care budgets. They serve to demonstrate that adaptations policy and service delivery should be formulated as a key element in a much broader and co-ordinated approach to preventative health services.

7. Conclusions and recommendations



Conclusions

Adaptations delivery in England

1. The need to change the approach to adaptations has gained urgency as a result of the rising demand caused by changing demographics and other changes in society. Funding is short and may become even scarcer as the impact of the recession takes its toll on local authority finances.
2. Our analysis is that the current problems in delivery of adaptations are not simply the result of funding shortages but also symptoms of inefficient practices and a belief that stretching out budgets by building delays into the process will protect authorities from greater demand and increased risk of failure. There is a complex interplay between these issues which means that more is needed to solve this crisis than simply money.
3. Speed is crucially important in the delivery of adaptations, but it is not the only consideration – effective adaptations also need to be right for the individual client, and agreeing the right course of action in cases where more than a simple adaptation is required can take time. A number of leading agencies and local authorities have managed to improve the efficiency of adaptations by addressing process issues. However, the national picture is less positive, with preventative benefits of adaptations, including the cost savings to health and social care budgets, often being lost due to the time which many people have to wait, and due to access being restricted for those not considered to be in highest need.
4. The approach to adaptations is still dominated by the Disabled Facilities Grant, which has built a bureaucracy around it that shows little sign of changing or reducing despite the modernisation of the programme. Evidence gathered from several leading authorities for this report supports our conclusion that simple, lower-cost adaptations such as stairlifts and level-access showers should not be subject to the level of assessment, means-testing and officer time needed for them to be paid for by DFG.

The role of home improvement agencies

5. For many home improvement agencies, major adaptations are a core element of what they do. Our findings from sector surveys and other data sources show that home improvement agencies year on year are increasingly involved in delivering DFG-funded adaptations. Our findings also confirm that the changes to the national DFG programme announced in February 2008 are starting to bed down within the services at a local level, but there are concerns that waiting times are increasing.
6. The overall performance of agencies in delivering adaptations varies – clearly there are many examples of good practice, with agencies using innovative ideas to improve processes and save budgets, as well as various forms of recycling. However, agencies are also at risk of becoming part of the problem. They need to work well with other professionals, demonstrate that what they are adding is of value, and drive improvements in efficiency.

Our vision for the delivery of adaptations services

We would like major adaptations to be viewed as one of a wide range of solutions to a problem which prevents independent living and increases the risk of falls and accidents in the home. Other solutions (such as minor adaptations, handy person services, assistive technology, housing options services, relocation grants, help finding an accessible property, and even help to purchase an accessible property) are all part of the same continuum of housing support services and are all worthy of consideration for public funding in cases where clients lack the ability to pay.

Adaptations services and who will provide them will largely be chosen by clients, as the government continues to pursue greater personalisation of health and care services. The amount of administration involved in delivering services, as well as the means-testing and assessment processes, will be proportionate to the costs to the public purse, the complexity of the work proposed, and the forecast benefit.

Recommendations

For home improvement agencies

1. Home improvement agencies should engage further with the opportunities arising from the DFG modernisation programme, including the greater flexibility for use of the DFG grant and local authority contribution. Agencies can play a strategic part in transforming adaptations services from the current focus on a single grant process to one that is integrated into a range of options for independent living.
2. To build a stronger case for funding from health and social care, home improvement agencies need to benchmark their performance and commit to more detailed monitoring and evaluation of the medium and longer term outcomes of their adaptations work. To help achieve this they should consider some of the service models which allow the agency to maintain longer term contact with their clients, such as an annual maintenance service or property ‘health check’.
3. Home improvement agencies can utilise their individual and collective resources to improve processes for procuring equipment and labour, contributing to improvements not only in the DFG process, but also in the returns on the resources deployed. Agencies should work

co-operatively to benchmark costs and investigate whether better value from suppliers could be obtained through procurement consortia.

4. Home improvement agencies stand the best chance of developing cost and process efficiencies if they operate as strategic partners with the local authority to deliver a large proportion of all adaptations, including typically high volumes of lower cost adaptations, rather than being considered as 'guns for hire' for use in complex cases only. This brings the prospect of both efficiency savings and the greater wealth of adaptations expertise which would be accumulated, not to mention the benefits of the holistic approach which agencies can offer to all potential clients.
5. Home improvement agencies need to be aware of the challenges to adaptations services driven by broader policy initiatives such as the personalisation agenda. This could force major changes, including greater competition from the commercial sector, by placing the buying power directly in the hands of clients. However, it also suggests a possible new role for the sector as adaptations 'advocates'. And, in cost-conscious times, the adoption of more progressive adaptations policies within local authorities may present opportunities for agencies to develop local accessible property registers.

For local and national policy makers

6. It is vital to break down the single-solution mentality caused by the current domination of the Disabled Facilities Grant. At a local authority level this could be achieved by changing local adaptations policies to deliver multiple forms of assistance for disabled people, using the 40% contribution which previously had to be committed to the DFG pot.
7. We encourage local authority housing departments to work with their home improvement agency partners to develop a range of imaginative policy approaches which meet the differing needs of local populations, and address the local housing stock characteristics and the changing demographics.
8. We stress the importance of providing holistic housing options services in tandem with adaptations services, which will ensure that all alternatives are considered before a client is consigned to the waiting list for a DFG which may not be the best solution for their needs.
9. At a national level, we recommend that the DFG minimum grant should be raised to £7,000 to remove all lower value, routine adaptations such as stairlifts and level-access showers from other high-value work which is complex enough to justify the costs of processing applications. If it is not possible to separate such items from the DFG process by cost, certain categories of routine adaptations could be excluded and delivered using greatly simplified assessment, application approval, means-testing and specification processes.
10. When reviewing adaptations policy at a national level, we would argue that the social care and health beneficiaries of the cost savings achieved by adaptations should also become the main source of funding for these kinds of intervention. This change might be more feasible if there was a national evaluation of the cost savings achieved by the DFG programme, similar to the recent analysis undertaken by CapGemini for services funded by Supporting People. Any analysis should also make an assessment of the funding currently available within local authorities to pay for adaptations, and estimate of the true scale of unmet demand nationally (which could be expressed as potential further cost savings).

Appendix 1

Below is a description of adaptations process milestones against which a responsible officer and a target time can be allocated. Where relevant, the name of the corresponding data field in FEMIS is given.

Milestone description	Responsible	Target days	Femis field
Enquiry to receipt by OT	OT		
Receipt by OT to OT assessment	OT		
OT assessment to despatch of OT14	OT		
Despatch of OT14 to receipt of OT14	HIA		<i>Date of Enquiry Case_dateofenquiry</i>
Receipt of OT14 to caseworker visit	HIA		<i>Caseworker assessment actual CaseDate_AssessDA</i>
Caseworker visit to technical survey	HIA		<i>Technical Survey actual CaseDate_TechDA</i>
Technical Survey to spec sent to OT	HIA		
Spec sent to OT to return of spec from OT	OT		
Return of spec to visit to client to explain spec	HIA		<i>Tender issued actual CaseDate_TenderIDA</i>
Client agreement to despatch of tenders	HIA		<i>Tender received actual CaseDate_TenderRDA</i>
Despatch of tenders to despatch of grant application	HIA		<i>Grant submitted actual CaseDate_GrantSDA</i>
Grant application to grant approval	LA		<i>Grant approved actual CaseDate_GrantADA</i>
Grant approval to start of work	HIA		<i>Commencement of Work actual CaseDate_WorkDA</i>
Start of work to OT notified of completion	HIA		
Completion notified to OT visit	OT		
OT visit to final technical visit	HIA		
Site visit to practical completion date	HIA		<i>Practical completion dat Case_praccmpdate</i>
Completion date to despatch of claim for payment	HIA		
Payment claim to payment made	LA		

Key:

OT: Occupational Therapy

HIA: Home Improvement Agency

LA: Local Authority (Borough or District)

Source: Westminster City Council

References and useful publications

A Review of Demand for Disabled Facilities Grant in the East Midlands (Foundations, 2008)

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Adaptation: Altering the House to Restore the Home (Heywood F, 2005)

http://www.sifo.no/files/housingstudies_2005_20_4.pdf

Better outcomes, lower costs: implications for health and social care budgets of investment in housing adaptations, improvement and equipment: a review of the evidence (Heywood F and Turner L, 2001)

<http://www.odi.gov.uk/docs/res/il/better-outcomes-report.pdf>

Delivering Housing Adaptations for Disabled People, A Good Practice Guide – June 2006 Edition (Communities and Local Government, 2006)

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/deliveringhousingadaptations>

Disabled Facilities Grant: The Package of Changes to Modernise the Programme (Communities and Local Government, 2008)

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Evaluation of the Individual Budgets Pilot Programme (Individual Budgets Evaluation Network (IBSEN), 2008)

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Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods: a national strategy for housing in an ageing society (Communities and Local Government, 2008)

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Money well spent: the effectiveness and value of housing adaptations (Heywood F, 2001)

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Reviewing the Disabled Facilities Grant Programme (Research summary) (Communities and Local Government, 2005)

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Right to control: a guide for local delivery agencies (Office for Disability Issues, 2009)

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