

Briefing

Home Adaptations

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Introduction

Home adaptations can give back independence, confidence and dignity to people who have become disabled, frail or developed a long-term illness and find that their home is no longer suitable or accessible. In 2007-08, 21% of people in social housing with a serious medical condition or disability stated that they did not consider their current accommodation to be suitable for their needs¹. Simply fitting an adaptation has the potential to allow disabled people and people with mobility issues to continue to live independently in their own homes.

Alongside other priorities, housing associations work with their local partners to support tenants who need aids and adaptations, either signposting to the local authority adaptations service or developing their own service to deliver and fit adaptations in tenants' homes. The briefing highlights a number of case studies illustrating good practice among housing associations across the country. This briefing also sets out the legal framework and other useful information specifically for housing associations on the fitting, funding and maintenance of adaptations.

1.0 Background

Each year, the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) helps around 35,000 disabled and older people to live safely and independently in their homes², by funding adaptations such as wheelchair ramps, stair-lifts and downstairs bathrooms. The Grant is used by owner occupiers, private tenants and social housing tenants, including tenants from housing associations. In summary, currently everyone is entitled to an assessment and, if found eligible, entitled to use of the Grant.

However, the delivery of DFG is dependent on the availability of funds and the priorities of local authorities. The Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 changed the delivery of the Grant. Central Government allocates the money as a named grant to each local housing authority. The DFG is allocated according to a needs-based formula, based on the number of disabled people on low incomes living in unsuitable and/or non-adapted properties. Each local authority makes bids for funds based on an independent indicator of need, which is the number of people in receipt of either Disability Living Allowance or Attendance Allowance.

Since 1997, Central Government funding for the programme has more than doubled in real terms. The Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010 announced that the grant will be going up to £180m for each of the three years from 2011-12, then up to £185m in 2014-15. A further £20 million for the grant was announced in January 2012. However, the removal of the private-sector housing-renewal stream has placed strain on the DFG, as some of this funding has historically been spent on adaptations.

The rapid increase in demand continues to outstrip funding for DFG. There are at least 145,000 people aged 65 or more whose accommodation was considered to be unsuitable due to their disability, which would require a further £975 million funding³. Over 50 per cent of home improvement agencies have reported an increase in waiting times for DFGs and 70% are experiencing a rise in demand.⁴

Furthermore, local authorities are no longer required to match fund the grant and the ring-fence for the disabled facilities grant was removed in 2011. This leaves it vulnerable to local cuts or easily diverted into other local authority spending priorities. It is for local authorities to determine, against local priorities, how they best use the Disabled Facilities Grant, ideally joining up with other money to create a complete package for people in need.

2.0 The legal framework

Currently, everyone, except local authority tenants, has access to the DFG. In practice, actual delivery is dependent on the availability of funds, which can lead to long delays.

In the past, housing associations were able to access dedicated funding for housing adaptations through the Social Housing Grant administered by the Housing Corporation. Spending by the Housing Corporation on adaptations dropped from £20.9 million to only £1.5 million, and in 2008, this funding stream was incorporated into the overall DFG pot. In 2008, the Social Housing Grant was also deemed no longer available to fund aids and adaptations.

Although some housing associations do choose to contribute to the funding of adaptations, the legal framework is very clear in that the legal responsibility for meeting the needs of people requiring adaptations rests with the local housing authority. In practice, the following authorities have responsibility:

Social Services Authorities:

- Under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970, social services authorities are responsible for assessing the need for adaptations, arranging for their provision, and publicising the availability of the service.
- Social services authorities have responsibility for providing equipment and minor adaptations costing up to £1000 for people who meet locally determined criteria for services under Fair Access to Care Services (FACS).⁵ Given local budgetary restrictions, this often means only people who are assessed as having a 'critical' care need will qualify for this funding.
- Social services authorities are also required, when requested by the housing authority, to give advice on the need for adaptations and whether any proposed works are appropriate.
- Social services authorities are required to set a budget for major adaptations to provide funding in cases over the individual DFG limit (set at £30,000), or when applicants cannot afford their assessed contributions.

Housing Authorities:

- The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act (1996) specifies that, local housing authorities are under a statutory duty to provide grant aid to disabled people for a range of adaptations to their home.
- Matched funding was abolished in 2008 and, as noted previously, the ring fence on the DFG was removed in 2011. The extensive cuts that made to local authority budgets following the Spending Review 2010 could mean DFG funding gets used for other local priorities and means local authorities are less likely to match funding from central government. However, as DFG is a mandatory grant, it should still be prioritised.

3.0 Local partnerships

Delivering DFGs can be complex because of the range of different partners required in the process to deliver even a basic adaptation. To reduce waste, time delays for clients and costs for all concerned, a number of housing associations have taken the opportunity to develop an agreement with the local authority to simplify the process and clarify responsibilities. The type of and content of agreement will vary according to the housing association involved, the type of stock they own or manage, and the profile of their tenants.

Many housing associations and local authorities have worked together to find ways to improve the delivery of adaptations. Sometimes these are operational ways of working developed by staff, sometimes they can be formalised in an agreement. What's important is that they are practical steps that work to improve the outcomes and experience for clients and minimise the bureaucracy for all partners. Approaches include:

- Regular meetings with the local authority
- A named contact in the housing association and the local authority, or a dedicated adaptations officer to coordinate all works and the relationships both internally and externally: for example with occupational therapists, local grant officers, lettings teams and technicians
- A common set of targets between the housing association, the local authority and other local partners covering the adaptations process from assessment or referral through to the completion of work and evaluation of the service
- Regular monitoring of performance, and identification and review of any barriers to better service delivery

For housing associations, there are benefits to developing an effective adaptation agreement with the local authority. Where they work well, they can improve customer satisfaction and quality of life for tenants, and reduce waiting times. Housing associations, in consultation with the local authority, are well placed to decide if an adaptations agreement is right for them and their tenants and if so, the kind of agreement that will genuinely clarify, simplify and aid the process.

East Thames Group, a housing group operating in east London and Essex, is one housing association who signed up to a protocol to facilitate the consistent and effective delivery of aids and adaptations.

The protocol applies to various London Boroughs and has been signed by a number of housing associations working in the same areas. It sets out the process for carrying out and funding adaptations for housing associations tenants. It describes the conditions for applying to the local authority for Disabled Facility Grants for all major adaptations and agrees that housing associations will fund minor adaptations up to £1000. Each housing association sets an annual fixed budget for these works. The protocol also means that housing associations can use their own contractors to carry out the work to make the process of repairing or replacing adaptations easier and quicker to deal with in-house.

For East Thames the protocol has worked well, allowing minor adaptations to be carried out much faster and providing a more responsive service for tenants who need such adaptations carried out to their home.

Housing providers also find peer support, good practice sharing and benchmarking with other providers to be important ways to improve their delivery of adaptations. A number of reference groups and forums exist to help housing associations do this, such as the Northern Adaptations Group or Regional Adaptations Forum.

The **Regional Adaptations Forum** in the North-West meets on a quarterly basis. Through benchmarking, participant organisations have benefitted from sharing good practice and from joint problem solving. This includes clarification on legal issues, access to DFGs, occupational therapists' approach to housing adaptations, allocation of adapted properties, and innovative use of equipment, scooter policies, and lift replacement programmes. The Forum has developed a core customer satisfaction survey that measures customer engagement, and the impact of the service. Each element of the survey is benchmarked against forum members to compare performance and customer experience. Importantly, the survey gathers information about outcomes for customers. The information is analysed to assess where the service achieves more for customers from a value for money perspective and why this varies across organisations. The Forum has become a valuable tool through which like-minded learning organisations have been able to continuously improve their services and use the group as a sounding board for new and innovative ideas.

Further resources: Several recent studies, including [Reviewing the Disabled Facilities Grant](#), Bristol University (2004), [Time to Adapt](#), Care & Repair England (2009), [Adapting for a lifetime](#), Foundations (2010) have called for simplification of the DFG process to reduce waste, cost and most critically, the time delays which can mean that individuals have to wait several years to have basic adaptations carried out.

4.0 Lettings systems

Lettings schemes can make a significant contribution to matching suitable properties to the people who need them. Through the provision of comprehensive and accurate information on adapted properties, a good lettings system ensures people who need adaptations are able to view property details and have a priority within the lettings scheme for those properties.

Many social landlords have their own internal systems for recording adapted properties, as well as which tenants use or need adaptations, to help themselves and their housing authority to keep up to date and on top of adaptations. Housing associations often liaise with occupational therapists to inform them of vacancies in adapted properties, as well as working closely with internal lettings teams to ensure adapted properties are reserved for people who need them.

Knowsley Housing Trust, a housing provider operating in the North West, has developed a database to register adapted properties and manage the adaptations process. The database records information about new adaptations required, as well as any adaptations that the tenant already has in their home. This has allowed the Trust to take stock of all adapted property. The database has been very successful and Knowsley Housing Trust has extended its use to six other housing providers in the area. They are also

looking at working with the local authority to use the database to manage the entire adaptations service for Knowsley.

Many housing providers and their local partners have worked to ensure choice-based lettings services advertise adaptations in properties, and have developed systems that actively prioritise vulnerable and disabled people for adapted properties.

Incommunities Group Ltd is a stock-transfer Registered Provider based and operating in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Incommunities launched a Disabled Housing Register in 2002, one of the first 13 choice-based letting pilots in the country. The website was replaced with www.openmoves.co.uk in March 2010 and is focused on housing options and not limited to advertising availability of stock. The Disabled Housing Register is very popular and there have been many applications to the service (approximately 1000-1500 housing applications per year). The register interlinks with Incommunities' stock database, which holds details of all properties with adaptations, and this is how clients are matched to stock. This in turn is linked to (Geographical Mapping Systems (GIS) profiling to produce much more detailed tenant and property analysis, which helps inform housing strategy. All of Incommunities' adapted properties are prioritised for disabled people.

Further resources: The Mayor of London's office has put together a good practice guide for social housing landlords on the [London Accessible Housing Register](#).

5.0 Assessment

Assessment for adaptations will generally be carried out by a member of the community occupational therapy team. In some cases, occupational therapists (OTs) will be directly employed by the social services authority, in others they will be employed by a health trust providing the assessments on behalf of social services. Some housing associations recruit their own OT or fund private OTs on a consultancy basis to ensure adaptations for their tenants are not delayed by shortages of local authority OTs, despite the fact that the legal responsibility for meeting the needs of people requiring adaptations rests with the local authority.

On the whole, OTs are required to assess for all moderate to major works, and exceptional works over £30,000. However, for minor works, some housing associations have trained staff to carry out the assessment. It is possible for the same person to be trained in the practical skills of fixing minor items like banister and grab rails, as well as the assessment techniques required to determine the need for such items. This all helps to speed up the waiting time for assessment and the fitting of the adaptation.

Wakefield and District Housing (WDH), a registered housing provider in Yorkshire, offers a 'Man in a Van' minor adaptation service to all its tenants. It provides a fast response to referrals for minor works such as installing grab rails. The team work in closely with the Primary Care Trust, ensuring faster hospital discharge by taking referrals directly from the hospital occupational therapist, and installing adaptations where possible on the same day. WDH also has an in-house team of occupational therapists, who at times accompany the 'Man in a Van' service, so assessments for major adaptations and installations can be carried out at the same time.

Four years ago, **Weaver Vale Housing Trust**, a housing provider in Cheshire West, experienced delays in their adaptations service as a result of a shortage of occupational therapists, and an increase in adaptation demand. They have since decided to part fund a full-time occupational therapist 50:50 with the local authority. Rather than referring to the pool of occupational therapists available with the local authority, this has meant that Weaver Vale has a dedicated occupational therapist who works solely with its tenants to assess their needs.

The occupational therapist sits in Weaver Vale's offices, and although they receive training and resources from the local authority, their workload is managed solely by the Trust. The occupational therapist has helped Weaver Vale develop a self-assessment form which tenants can fill out themselves and the occupational therapist can quickly sign-off any minor adaptations required. Weaver Vale's tradesmen have been trained to fit these adaptations quickly and effectively, allowing Weaver Vale to direct the occupational therapist to the most important cases. The occupational therapist also works closely with the re-housing team in identifying adapted properties for people who need the adaptations.

Further resources: Detailed guidance on the supplying of some minor works without the need for an occupational therapy assessment is available in the COT/Housing Corporation (2006) '[Minor Adaptations without Delay](#)'.

6.0 Publicity and engagement

Providers of adaptations can make the process easier for tenants by connecting them with practical sources of help and advice. At the start of the process, many housing associations already provide tenants with an overview of the adaptations process from assessment to completion of works and evaluation, either giving details of a key contact and the technicians employed to carry out the work, or signposting to the local authority and the process of applying for a DFG.

Housing associations often collect views from disabled and older tenants on the quality and specific benefits of adaptations, the process involved, and the time taken, in order to improve quality and speed. These surveys can be used to set targets, keep a check of how targets on waiting times and satisfaction of tenants are being met, allowing tenants to help monitor any improvement or deterioration to the service.

Profiling tenants also helps associations to track changing needs and to reach more of those who need assistance. Proactive visiting in general-needs stock is a tried-and-tested method which has discovered much unmet need. Equally, surveying tenants or carrying out a robust equality impact assessment allows housing associations to target services in specific areas if necessary or focus more attention on a specific type of adaptation.

Leeds Federated Housing Association is very aware that some adaptations can involve significant upheaval, particularly if in the bathroom. Therefore, after the adaptation has been agreed, the association will contact the tenant to talk through the process. They run through a checklist which describes the process and any special requirements, as well as giving details of the people

undertaking the work and the best time for them to start. The association also allows the tenant to make a choice of fittings and fixtures: for example, in the fitting of over-bath showers tenants can choose the tiles and flooring if required.

Origin Housing, a housing provider working across London and the South East, has made a number of changes to their adaptations service, following an extensive review and benchmarking of the service, completion of an equality impact assessment (EIA) and close work with tenants to get their feedback.

The review identified a number of difficulties tenants experienced with the service: some adaptations took up to two years, there was a lack of coordination or point of contact for tenants, and the contractors lacked expertise in fitting adaptations.

Origin has followed up all tenants where a need for adaptations was identified in their customer profile collection project, and following the EIA, Origin is also using the customer profile information to target those who are not accessing the service.

Origin has since made a number of improvements, which have led to a two week turn round target for minor adaptations and an eight month turn round target for all major adaptations, including the time needed to apply for a DFG and for assessing the person's adaptation requirements. Origin has selected three approved contractors who specialise in adaptations, and who work to fixed prices, which has cut down the length of time required for tendering contracts out and agreeing a price for works.

Origin also employed an adaptations coordinator who carries out the adaptations assessment, helps apply for DFG, and overviews the whole process, chasing the local authority on any delays. The adaptations coordinator liaises with the tenants and keeps them informed of any progress, and also liaises with other services that may be required such as housing related support, domiciliary care, and re-housing if necessary.

Further resources: ['Communication with Older People in the Design of Major Housing Adaptations'](#) (SPARC 2008) is a useful publication for tips on engaging with older people in the design and implementation of adaptations.

7.0 Linking with health

Adapted, accessible housing - alongside housing-related support - can massively reduce the cost of health and social care through hospital admissions or residential care. The total annual expenditure on falls by older people in the UK is over £1000 million⁶, of which 59% is borne by the NHS. Adaptations help prevent falls and can reduce these NHS costs. They can also ensure someone's house is accessible for a return home from hospital, preventing unnecessarily long stays in hospital or a move to residential care, which can cost up to £36,280 per annum (£697per week) depending on the person's needs.⁷ Such preventative services boost the health, quality of life and well-being of older people, allowing many to maintain the independence they want, and also achieve savings to the tax payer.

Some housing associations also help set-up and sustain home improvement agencies and handyperson services, which carry out rapid repairs and minor adaptations. This has helped to speed up the adaptations process and improve customer satisfaction, preventing accidents or re-admission to hospital.

Magna Housing Association, a housing provider operating in the South West, contributes to a local Handy Van service provided by Age UK in partnership with West Dorset District Council. The Handy Van service enables older people to have odd jobs, small repairs and improvements, security measures and smaller adaptations carried out in their homes. Depending on the individual's circumstances there may be a charge for materials or labour or both. Additional funding has now been provided for a 'Safer Homes Scheme' with funding through Dorset County Council and NHS Dorset to enable older or disabled people to have smaller adaptations carried out. These adaptations can be carried out free of charge by the Handy Van or other contractors if they are referred by health professionals. Local partners believe this scheme will help speed up clients' release from hospital and/or prevent admission or re-admission to hospital.

Brighter Futures, a housing provider in the West Midlands, runs a floating support scheme called 'safe and sound', which enables older people in Stoke on Trent to live safely and independently in their own homes for as long as possible. The service was launched on 1st November 2009 with the capacity to support up to 102 people over the age of 55 years, through a team of six full-time support team members. Brighter Futures often receives referrals through hospital or through a community rehabilitation setting. The team provides practical support, access to appropriate aids and adaptations, and to grants for other home improvements. They work with the tenant to generally improve their health and wellbeing, help them with finances, as well as guidance on to other health and care services. The service is jointly funded by both Supporting People and NHS Stoke.

Further resources: The Federation's publication, '[Health and housing: worlds apart?](#)' (2009) describes in more detail some of these opportunities for housing organisations.

Further evidence of the cost benefits of an effective adaptations service can be found in '[Better outcomes, lower costs: implications for health and social care budgets of investment in housing adaptations, improvements and equipment: A review of the evidence](#)' (Office for Disability Issues 2007).

8.0 Use of equipment

There are occasions where housing associations need to remove adaptations. This can happen because the equipment needs replacing or because an empty property gets allocated through choice-based lettings by a resident who does not need an adaptation.

Many housing associations operate systems to allow them to re-use equipment such as stair-lifts and ramps. Sometimes housing associations fit the equipment so as it can be easily removed and re-used in a different setting.

In some cases, tenants would prefer to move into another property with the appropriate adaptations already fitted, or where the living space is more accessible and adaptations can be easily made.

Arcon Housing Association, based in Manchester and part of the Northern Lights Group, developed an arrangement with Stannah to recycle stair-lifts previously fitted in their accommodation. When the stair-lift is no longer required, either because the individual has moved on or because their needs have changed, Stannah will come and take out the stair-lift and store it free of charge. When a new need arises, Stannah charges a small fee to reinstall the stair-lift, customising it to the needs of the new tenant. Arcon Housing Association has estimated that this saves the organisation around 65% against the cost of a new installation.

Since 2002, **Incommunities Group Ltd** has recycled approximately 350 to 440 adapted voids every year through Able Living, their Disabled Persons Housing Service. Able Living is a specialist service offering free housing advice and needs assessments to people with disabilities or health issues. The service is the first point of contact for hospital discharge and homeless applicants with health issues, as well as for clients in need of aids/adaptations, or wishing to access general accessible or sheltered/extra care housing. The service is based on providing options to help the client stay in their home or move into accommodation that is right for them.

Able Living identifies potential tenants to move into adapted stock. The recycling of adapted voids saves Incommunities £1.2 million per annum. This saving is from reduced waste by avoiding adapting stock on demand or removing adaptations once a property is re-let. Equally, there is no time lost waiting for occupational therapists or technical assessments.

From April 2009 to March 2011, 248 under-occupied households and/or tenants seeking a major adaptation have been assisted to move into more suitable accommodation or to pre-adapted stock through Incommunities' 'move to improved living scheme'. The average cost of the move works out at just £425, which may include the costs of moving, carpets, decoration and furniture disposal. During the same period, the "move to improved living scheme" has freed up 225 four-, three- and two-bedroom properties (mainly family houses) for families that are priority homeless, statutory overcrowded, or in temporary accommodation. In practice, the tenants who have moved have appreciated the personal service. Case studies have shown increased tenants' independence, as the physical barriers to their home have been removed. A "paper" saving of £800k was achieved by rehousing clients initially seeking adaptations into pre-adapted stock as part of this project.

The Able Living service is also developing an estate agency for disabled people. 'Project Estate' is a joint initiative between Incommunities, the University of Bradford and the local authority. It is the UK's first estate agency offering disabled people and their families the opportunity to buy, sell and rent accessible and adapted homes in both social housing and private sectors. The new service aims to go live in October 2012 and will extend the range of housing options available to its customers. Funding for the project came from the Economic and Social Research Council and the Technology Strategy Board, which is matched by Incommunities.

Further resources: [The Report of the Mobility Taskforce](#) (2010) chaired by David Orr, Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, looks at different policy proposals to boost mobility in social housing. The taskforce report was commissioned by Grant Shapps when he was shadow Housing Minister.

Conclusion

This briefing provides a snapshot of what housing associations are achieving in their adaptations service and shows that they are constantly innovating and improving services. It also shows how housing associations are keen to engage with tenants, not just to provide them with an adaptation as quickly and effectively as possible, but also to become aware of their needs in a holistic way, and thus bring together other services.

This briefing will be useful to other housing providers to show them the national picture on adaptations, and provide ideas for further developing their adaptations service. As well as providing clarification on the legal framework on the delivery of adaptations, this briefing could also be used by local authorities and housing associations to develop partnership approaches to meeting the adaptation needs of their tenants.

¹ Communities and Local Government (2009) *Housing in England 2007-08*

² Communities and Local Government (2008) *Lifetime Homes, Lifetime Neighbourhoods*

³ Care and Repair England (2010), *Time to Adapt. Home adaptations for older people: The increase in need and future of state provision*

⁴ Foundations (2010), *Adapting for a Lifetime*

⁵ The FACS framework was introduced in 2003 to address inconsistencies across the country about who gets support. The principle behind FACS is that there should be one single process to determine eligibility for social care support. It provides a framework to enable councils to stratify need for social care support into four possible criteria - low, moderate, substantial, and critical - depending on local budgetary considerations.

⁶ Scuff ham, P, Chaplin, S and Legood, R (2003) 'Incidence and costs of unintentional falls in older people in the United Kingdom' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 57 740-744. Price here adjusted to 2009 levels in line with ONS inflation statistics.

⁷ ODPM (2005) *Reviewing the disabled facilities grant*: 21 (cost adjusted to 2009 level).