

Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Inquiry into Home Maintenance and Adaptations Services for Older People in Wales

Introduction

Care & Repair Cymru is very pleased to have the opportunity to address the National Assembly for Wales' Equality of Opportunity Committee.

We hope to demonstrate our continuing and developing commitment to the principles that it seeks to uphold, through Care & Repair Agencies' work in developing the quality of life of older people in Wales.

Care & Repair Cymru has now been actively involved in the provision of housing services to older people for 20 years. In partnership with and funded by the Housing Directorate of the National Assembly for Wales, we have helped hundreds of thousands of clients, developing a network of 22 agencies covering every unitary authority in Wales. We have canvassed the views of all our Agencies in Wales to achieve a representative overview of their work.

Our Vision is that all older people in Wales shall have warm, safe and secure homes that meet their individual needs. This principle is embodied in the concept which is the holistic approach to the assessment of individual housing needs.

Access to appropriate housing and to housing-related services is recognised as a key factor in achieving independence and quality of life in old age. All older citizens in Wales should have equality of access to these services, regardless of location and tenure, and is fundamental to achieving an adequate response to the aspirations for old age in Wales.

In acknowledging the National Assembly for Wales' own evidence that Wales has the highest proportion of older people in the UK and the lowest proportion of socially rented property, the urgency of our mission to deliver necessary home improvement, maintenance and adaptation services to this sector of society is clear.

The Rapid Response Adaptations Programme (RRAP)

The Rapid Response Adaptations Programme (RRAP) has evolved under a WAG funding scheme, delivering prompt assistance to clients on an increasing scale. This has led to many Local Authorities offering parallel schemes aimed at resolving healthcare issues such as hospital discharges, within prescribed time limits.

The Review of Housing for Older people in Wales (2004)

Having worked closely with the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee in the preparation of the Review of Housing for Older people in Wales (2004), Care & Repair Cymru has already created much of the blueprint for the partnership working between the voluntary sector and local authorities in Wales.

The Review advanced the principle of the 'paradigm shift', the fundamental view of Older people and the place their needs rightfully take in an overview of the general housing situation (Report paragraph 2.4).

Along with this emphasis is that of 'Lifetime Homes', forward-planning the construction of newbuild properties to ensure they remain functional for Older people in their principles of design, construction and internal fitments. Whilst these policy initiatives have been taken forward by National Government, much has remained to be developed through co-working between the voluntary, local authority and healthcare sectors.

The Review of Disabled Facilities Grants (2005)

Subsequent partnership working developments created between Care & Repair agencies and Local Authorities are detailed below in the Waiting times for DFGs (Disabled Facilities Grants) and other Local Authority Grants' section of this document.

Under the terms of the 1970 Chronically-Sick and Disabled Persons Act, a Local Authority is legally compelled to conduct a needs assessment in the home of any person referred to them by an Occupational Therapist (OT), and provide a DFG to cover the cost of any works deemed necessary. This grant remains the only award from Local Authorities for works to conduct adaptations for disability in private housing available in all Welsh LA areas, following the 1996 Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act, and the resulting Regulatory Reform Order.

One key conclusion of the Review was that the information publicly-available regarding the grant was inadequate (Major Conclusions, Legal, (2)). New working arrangements have remedied this by empowering accessibility.

A second conclusion was that due to the requirements of the application process, the waiting time for DFGs was identical irrespective of the scale or complexity of the works involved (Major Conclusions, Delays, (14)). Again, fast tracking processes have improved service delivery times.

In Part C, two key conclusions of the Review were that:

Those Local Authorities who had made the most significant reductions in waiting times for an OT assessment, had the longest waiting time for a Local Authority Housing grant process (1.8) and that

Every LA in Wales agreed that a standard national assessment process for OTs was desirable to ensure uniform standards.

These findings highlighted the need to create focussed and complementary working groups in both Social Services and their OTs and with the Local Authority Housing departments. This has ensured that there is no imbalance in workloads and complementary practices in delivering works to clients.

In the Major Conclusions RRAP section, the RRAP grant was seen as 'highly-successful' (36), and 'highly-valued by Local Authorities and Health service providers' (37). This success was underwritten by the figure of 50% of Welsh Local Authorities who provided additional resources to further develop local RRAP services (39).

Resources for Home Maintenance and Adaptations services

The co-ordinating work of Care & Repair Agencies is of pivotal importance in guiding clients to available grant funding, but equally importantly, in advising, counselling and actively supporting them in organising works to improve their homes.

All agencies are directly funded by the National Assembly for Wales by a Core funding stream. This maintains the key agency staff and their operational base. The range of housing solutions Agencies offer to their clients' needs varies according to area. The local availability of housing grants tends to shape their activities beyond the Core service. Typical Agency services would include some or all of the following staff functions:

Agency Chief Officers

Caseworkers

Technical Officers

Handypersons

Administration staff

Resources for Home Maintenance and Adaptations services - Continued

Beyond the staff and services described above, agencies are involved in several major areas of works:

Designated contractors' lists

Telecare projects

Home Energy Efficiency works assistance

Designated Contractors

Designated contractors are listed by agencies on a register that is reviewed annually, and offer Agency-supervised services which are quality-checked and appropriately priced. This is important for clients who may be at risk of fraud or over-pricing when dealing with tradespeople carrying out complex and expensive works in their homes

Home Energy Efficiency

Home Energy Efficiency measures have a demonstrable impact in reducing environmental health factors that generate major illness in older people. Grants sourced through the Home Energy Efficiency Service (HEES) provide for insulation of walls, floors and loft spaces, and the installation of modern and efficient heating appliances. Care & Repair offer a home Energy Efficiency check, and assess fuel costs for every client.

Telecare

Telecare and other related services use modern technology, enabling clients to have access to networks of specialised helpers who can communicate with them and provide regular advice and reassurance. The alarms and other monitoring systems installed in their homes enable carers to have an 'early warning system' in place to alert them to problems. These are essential in helping people with dementia, who are a growing portion of the population. There are Telecare schemes involving Care & Repair in 9 Welsh Local Authority areas.

Grants and Minor Adaptations application processes

Many urgent needs of older people can be addressed using straightforward installations and adaptations that require little or no structural modification of the existing building. These include single-flight stairlifts, and walk-in showers, as well as handrails and ramps to enable access and mobility in the home.

The difficulties in providing a service to clients in a realistic timescale has led to a range of new grants smaller than DFGs. These exploit possibilities to reduce bureaucracy and increase partnership working between Care & Repair Agencies and occupational therapists and

Local Authority social services. These have evolved from the initial pilot period of the Rapid Response Adaptations Programme.

The Rapid Response Adaptations Programme is well-established with healthcare and social services practitioners as an effective measure. Since it was established by a National Assembly for Wales Ministerial Order, its grant ceiling of £350 or less has provided a benchmark for small works grants. It has been augmented by locally-funded Local Authority and health grants of a similar size.

Small Works Grants: Safety at Home and similar schemes

Some examples of these show a general pattern. Cardiff Council work in partnership with Care & Repair. In the Safety At Home Grant process (<£1k) where the target period for completion is 15 days. This figure is added to the <£350 RRAP allocated to the works. A Caseworker completes the application form, and the Technical Officer drafts the specification of works and identifies a contractor to carry them out at an agreed rate (where feasible) within the Grant's limits. An Occupational Therapist (OT), or a Care & Repair Caseworker, can make a referral for this Grant. It can be used to cover safe access works, path and step reprofiling, electrical works, and the general installation of any prescribed measures to ensure a client is safe and secure in their home.

In Bridgend the 'Bridgend County Stairlift Partnership', a Social Services/Care & Repair partnership, has enabled clients to have a straight-run stairlift installation within 35 days, rather than the normal DFG delivery period of 8 or 9 months. This is to be extended to cover bathing facilities. Similar schemes with a 35-day deadline have been developed between Care & Repair in Cardiff, and Cardiff Council.

In Carmarthenshire, the LA and the Care & Repair Agency have an arrangement that straight-run stairlifts are a specific installation where a Housing Department officer assessment is not required, and Care & Repair can carry out the works assessment, speeding up the process.

Maintenance of installations and equipment

In Wales, both the Cardiff and Bridgend Care & Repair Agencies will remove stairlifts and recycle them once serviced. The National Assembly for Wales Review of DFGs (2005) showed a wide amount of verbatim evidence that many DFG recipients stop using stairlifts once the standard manufacturer warranty has run out, as they cannot afford to maintain them. A facet of the Bridgend scheme is access to reasonably priced and supervised maintenance contractors who can carry out regular maintenance and repairs.

The 2005 DFG Report also stated that many structurally-adapted properties are not listed on any LA register for re-use to house disabled clients. Caerphilly County Borough Council have an OT embedded in their Housing Directorate, whose role includes "the reallocation of adapted or adaptable properties" to suitable recipients. Therefore, there is evidence that this is an active policy, in some areas of Wales.

Waiting times for DFGs and other LA Grants

DFGs are generally administered by Local Authority Social Services (SS), using Occupational Therapists embedded in the Social Services team. Because of the statutory duty of care that Local Authorities have to disabled people in their area, these grants are exempt from the terms of the Regulatory Reform Order. To some extent the problems which typically occur with DFGs in process, can be summarized thus:

Lack of sufficient numbers, or organisation of, OTs (Occupational Therapists)

LA policy of Housing Grants Officers inspecting all properties to have works undertaken

LA policy demanding the original Deeds to a property rather than online copy as legal proof of ownership

LA insistence on means testing for all works covered by DFGs, in absence of smaller Grants

LA delays in approving specifications set out for a conversion or installation

LA rejection of the tenders received from contractors for the works (normally 2-3 tenders per job).

As recognised, the DFG application process is therefore a complex system of separate operations. One Care & Repair Agency has reported that they have recently completed a DFG-funded project, which took 5.5 years. This is mirrored by another area, where the waiting time to an OT assessment alone, has been 5 years in one case.

In Newport the Social Services department has overhauled arrangements completely. The OT team is now under one collective manager and they receive referrals from anyone wanting to start a grant application. These can be sent by phone, in person, by fax, post or email. A standardised Unified Assessment Procedure has been created to cover all the formal paperwork submitted to the LA, and the Care & Repair Agency has a working arrangement that the Care & Repair preliminary enquiry form can be submitted with the OT paperwork, establishing that the client wants Care & Repair to act as their agent through the grant application process.

This example highlights the benefits of the standardisation of working methods within local authority OT groupings, as reflected in the paperwork used. Where supported by a co-ordinated management strategy, this seems to be a successful and flexible model, allowing the Care & Repair agency and other third sector parties to start the referrals process to an OT.

Usefulness of information and advice on Home Maintenance and Adaptations services

The National Assembly for Wales has long since adopted the principle of Lifetime Homes. This complements the housing and older people principle of the 'Paradigm Shift' away from the 'clinical' and 'welfare' models of disability and ageing. Rather than seeing the client as having a disability as a strictly clinical condition, divorced from the environmental factors impacting upon it, it is to be seen as an integral part of those factors, where they impact upon it.

Care & Repair Cymru and agencies have made progress in developing an agenda to address these factors in all aspects of the Care & Repair service. We have also recognised the need to develop proactive as well as reactive solutions.

The Bridgend Home Maintenance Service is an example of the move to preventative services, initiated by Care & Repair Cymru, funded by the National Assembly for Wales and implemented by Bridgend Care & Repair, may it be anticipated serve as a service model for the future.

The Service Model

The aim was to create 'a comprehensive cyclical Home Maintenance and Assessment Service' that would provide annual contact with clients and pre-empt the problems they face in general property maintenance.

This pilot scheme focussed on two separate wards of Bridgend County, including the most affluent, Porthcawl. It was found that need was far higher in the less-affluent ward. It responds on an ongoing basis to problems ranging from home maintenance, decorating and servicing of appliances, to gardening work.

By retaining data gathered from householders at the inception of works and conducting a thorough annual check on the state of their properties, the 'cyclical' element of re-surveying and ordering works as necessary, has been created. In making this possible, the input of Valleys to Coast Housing Association is crucial as they provide an organised day to day maintenance service.

Service Provision

Through a system of annual visits it considers how changes in the personal circumstances and general physical environment of the individual may benefit from new housing solutions. Revising scheduled work plans, prioritising works and ensuring a timely, proactive and preventative service meets the changing needs and aspirations of the person.

Information and New Partnerships

Following the success of the initial pilot, the 2007/08 period saw the Agency developing a Home Maintenance Manual, informing homeowners about the issues of maintaining their properties. This hard copy would help to enable clients of the new Home Maintenance Service. It was funded via client subscription and aimed to reduce costs via timely and well-planned pre-emptive maintenance work.

By creating links with a broad base of Hospitals, Day Care Centres, GP Surgeries and other Third Sector bodies to inform them of the Scheme's existence and enable referrals to it, the Staying Put Scheme has been able to increase its' scope and impact across Bridgend.

This last point is crucial, because experience within Care & Repair has shown that the same problem of information and publicity applies in communication between statutory, healthcare and third sector bodies, as it does between them as individual entities and members of the public.

A close parallel with this model is the referrals process used by Newport Council's OT service, discussed above, where any individual or body may make a referral.

Learning on the job - Care & Repair's accumulated experience

Much of the competence that Care & Repair Cymru and their Agencies in Wales have acquired, is the result of years of accumulated experience.

Although it is difficult to quantify this kind of expertise in measurable or demonstrable terms, in Bridgend, the Staying Put Scheme taught Bridgend Care & Repair and Care & Repair Cymru much about larger-scale coordinated schemes of works in maintenance and renovation.

The broad conclusions of Bridgend Care & Repair based on their experience over 2 and a half years, are that responses to client surveys highlighted the following core problems for older householders:

The inability to diagnose structural or other problems, in advance of failure

Low income and/or assets leaving them with too little available capital to fund works

The lack of available and competent contractors

The fear of incompetent or criminal contractors overcharging them, or carrying-out defective works

These are concerns which are typically addressed by the Care & Repair service described above, but the Staying Put Scheme aimed at creating a coordinated and large-scale model of an ongoing service to clients.

Performance management of Home Maintenance & Adaptations services by Local Authorities/C&R Agencies

It is longstanding policy to use common systems to input data and generate subsequent quarterly reports to the Housing Directorate at the National Assembly for Wales, showing detailed breakdowns of data received from each Agency. These show the number of cases for each grant completed during the period; the number being progressed, and so on. These reports are known as Service Aims and Performance Objectives (SAPOs), and allow the National Assembly for Wales and Care & Repair Cymru to negotiate agreed target areas for performance in each relevant area.

Resources for Home Maintenance and Adaptations services

Equity Release has been a favoured measure for creating funding for necessary works in recent years, re-mortgaging properties for a future portion of their sale value, on the decease of their owners. However, fluctuations in the value of the housing market have tended to make this a less viable option than it once seemed to be.

A second option gaining favour in respect of housing maintenance is 'Lifetime Loans'. This concepts involve a Local Authority providing a repayable lump sum in the form of a Grant to cover the cost of necessary works on a property. It is intended that generally this will be redeemed from the sale value of the property after the owner's decease.

The National Assembly for Wales has supported two pilots in Wales in partnership with Local Authorities and these are proving a useful approach for older people, who like the reassurance of local authorities' involvement. Both of these options have potential pitfalls in terms of the future value of a property at the time of sale and the resulting reduction of its' value as an asset.

The Bridgend Staying Put Scheme has demonstrated the viability of a subscription-funded Home Maintenance Service, whose model could be extended to cover future costs of installations or adaptations, in addition to standard maintenance and gardening works.

However, there is also research showing that at this age, properties have frequently had the optimum amount of maintenance and development input, during the owner's lifetime. Therefore, there is a need for further research to examine the available options for a general strategy to tackle a future funding shortfall in Local Authority housing grants to private homeowners.

A subscription-funded service to householders would bypass many issues surrounding limited Local Authority funding for specific housing grant works and enable householders to actively plan for their old age ahead of the State Pension threshold and pre-empting at least some of the problems which currently occupy thinking on the consequences for Healthcare of an ageing population.

This proposal relies on the availability and coordination of a sufficiently-large body of labour to carry out works under efficient management and oversight. The fundamental problem is creating that labour force and training it in the necessary skills. In the example of Bridgend County, the presence of Valleys to Coast HA with their Direct Labour Force ensured that there were no logistical problems to negotiate in creating the Staying Put Scheme. However, many similar working agreements could be created along similar lines, in other areas.

Conclusions

Our examination of the issues raised in the Equality of Opportunity consultation has led Care & Repair Cymru to conclude that older people would benefit if the following issues were addressed:

The Rapid Response Adaptations Programme

Whereas Rapid Response Adaptations Programme (RRAP) is recognised as a successful and effective service that addresses the health, social care and housing needs of older people, the experience of managing the programme has demonstrated the need to develop and enhance the service further. An appraisal of the funding required to fully meet the objectives of the RRAP, including a strategic appraisal of the programme's achievements linked to a framework of local investment is required. The extension of RRAP in funding and potentially broadening its application in terms of tenure would meet the growing demand for this service.

Bureaucracy

The simplification and streamlining of the grant applications processes is a major success and some of the benefits immediately evident from the experience of RRAP.

Disabled Facilities Grants

Investment in Disabled Facility Grants to compensate for the demographics of poverty and deprivation, in a targeted way.

Small Maintenance Works

The development of specific small grants addressing on going maintenance, and targeting older people in deprived circumstances.

Information

The provision of good quality information for the public about local authority housing grants, and local solutions to ensure a timely response for housing concerns.