

Equality of Opportunity Committee

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Response from the Deputy Minister for Housing to the Committee's report on Home Maintenance and Adaptations Services for Older People in Wales

14 September 2009

The housing needs of older people have long been and remain a high priority for the Assembly Government which is why I have commissioned a strategy on this subject and which is due to be finalised shortly. The Committee's report is therefore timely in providing a specific dimension, one which will further help us focus and sharpen our policies in this large and diverse area.

The needs of older people are indeed many and varied, no more so than in the field of home maintenance and adaptations. The stark demographics attendant on an ageing population are well known and do not need amplifying. With older people living longer and wishing to remain independent in their own homes it is incumbent on the Assembly Government to ensure that the right policies and infrastructures are in place to ensure that services are delivered effectively, consistently and in accordance with the wishes of older people and, where appropriate, their carers and families.

Whilst much has been achieved in these policy areas the Committee has rightly highlighted a number of imperfections and systemic weaknesses that are prevalent in the current administrative and funding arrangements for home adaptations. We will strive to remedy and eliminate these and other shortcomings the Committee describes. Variability in service provision is in no one's interest, not least the older person who rightly expects to receive equality of treatment and the same high standards of service irrespective of whether he or she lives in Holyhead or Chepstow.

Crucial to the success of the policies and initiatives in this sphere is effective corporate working both within local authorities and between authorities and its partners. This was the essential message of the 2005 report on housing adaptations, which the Committee focussed strongly on, and it remains the case today. That is why local authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association, as delivery agents, must ensure "inter alia" consistency and parity in legislative interpretation, administrative approach, information dissemination and service delivery. In implementing the recommendations we will be working closely with the WLGA and partner organisations in order to achieve these aspirations and others specified by the Committee.

The Committee has done older people a valuable service in highlighting the problems they face in obtaining adaptations. The report also provides a solid platform on which to tackle the issues that have been illuminated and I thank the Committee for its diligence and commitment.

I have set out below my response to the Report's individual recommendations.

Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government conducts a thorough, evidence-based review of what has been done to implement the recommendations of the 2005 Review of Disabled Facilities Grants and what progress has been made.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. I will ensure that resources are found to undertake this review whether on an external basis or as an internal assignment. We will also inform the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and all Welsh local authorities of the review and exhort the WLGA that this be given priority.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government reports annually to the Equality of Opportunity Committee on progress made against the recommendations in the 2005 Review, and the recommendations in this report. The report should be underpinned by data collected via the performance indicator, and this should be a commitment in the Older People's Strategy.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. Information relating to progress made against each of the recommendations of the 2005 review was provided during the course of the Committee's deliberations. This will now be done more formally and in accordance with the recommendation. I will write to the Deputy Minister for Social Services of the need for this to be a commitment in the Strategy for Older People in Wales.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government, in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association, should develop and co-ordinate a programme of evaluation and research into what works well that will inform revised guidance to local authorities. This should be informed by the views of older people themselves.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. We will work in partnership with the WLGA to develop a programme of evaluation and research along the lines suggested. There is already evidence of much good practice in the field resulting from the introduction of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002. We will however build on this and go further, embracing the views of other organisations representative of older people as well as service users.

Financial Implications - none for the Welsh Assembly Government. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets. Further discussions are required with the WLGA on their contribution to the research budget.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government carries out research into areas where there is currently very little information available, making it difficult to assess performance and potentially hiding gaps in services. This should include:

information across tenures;

information on older people with additional needs; and

information relating to people of different ages.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. This research could link and be included with that specified under Recommendation 1. Again, we will work with key partners from the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors as well as older people themselves.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government, informed by the outcome of recommendations 3 and 4 and in development with key partners, takes a strategic approach to monitoring the performance of local authorities in delivering housing adaptations, providing assistance where poor practice is detected, and developing an ongoing mechanism for the sharing of good practice.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. We will work with relevant partners to devise more appropriate performance monitoring of local authorities in delivering housing adaptations. As delivery agents, and through corporate working, local authorities will be crucial to the success of this process as will be the commitment, leadership and prioritisation shown by the WLGA.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets. Any additional costs devolving to local authorities will need to be considered further.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government refines the current Performance Indicator to ensure it provides a clearer picture of performance. Performance management information would be more meaningful if information was available by:

waiting times for agreed different types of adaptation;

the time taken for each different stage of the process of an adaptation;

the proportion of adaptations that were completed within a certain number of days;

different age groups.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle and certainly agree that performance data should provide a clear picture of performance. But we need always to take care not to create undue data collection burdens, or to generate performance data which, for various reasons, do not accurately measure the quality of local authority services or citizens' experiences of them. For instance, it should be relatively straightforward to split data between adaptations provided for adults and children. However, measuring percentage completion within a set period is notoriously misleading, particularly when there is an inherently wide range in the time that works take to be completed.

We will shortly be consulting on the whole local government performance measurement framework for 2010-11, and will include in that consultation such of the committee's proposals as appear viable from a wider performance management perspective.

Financial Implications - none identified at this stage but will require further consideration.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government develops guidance to clarify the complex and confusing legal framework surrounding the ownership of adaptations and the related responsibilities for maintaining them.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. We will re-examine existing guidance in NAW Circular 20/02 and update and clarify as necessary.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government investigates the feasibility of having one single, publicly available register of adapted housing across all tenures.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation as far as public sector housing is concerned. We will discuss this issue further with the WLGA. NAW Circular 20/02 already publicises the merits of a single register of adapted housing for social housing. The situation in the private sector is more complex as many homes may have been adapted without grant aid and local authorities will not be aware of the adaptations. We will however discuss this with the WLGA.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government, in consultation with older people, develops guidance on how information in relation to home maintenance and adaptations services is provided for older people. This should include guidance on:

The content of information;

The form/language it should take to make it most accessible; and,

Dissemination of information to reach the maximum audience.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. We will discuss these proposals further with Care & Repair Cymru in the light of the Bridgend Care & Repair agency's pilot study in this area. The proposals also chime with work currently being undertaken by WAG officials, led by DHSS-CPHSD, as part of a comprehensive Community Services Framework for Older People, on whose steering group housing is represented.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government determines the local authority areas where partnership working could be improved and, with those local areas, investigates the potential for Local Service Boards to drive improved partnership working.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. I will raise this issue with the Minister for Finance and Public Service Delivery and work to these ends.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government uses the Strategic Capital Investment Fund to boost the building trade by engaging contractors in adaptations work.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle. However, additional resources would only be appropriate if it is clear that local authorities maintain the underlying programme of DFGs and utilise any additional SCIF funding to deliver an enhanced programme. This will need to be considered in the context of the inter-departmental bidding round for SCIF. I will also need to discuss this issue with the WLGA to see how this proposal can be implemented and to ensure an injection of Strategic Capital Investment Funding will result in an enhanced programme of DFGs.

Financial Implications - these will have to be considered in discussions with Cabinet colleagues.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government asks local authorities what investment they have made in Occupational Therapist services over the past 4 years to match the increased volumes of older people with a need for those services.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. I will consider these matters in conjunction with the WLGA and raise it with the Minister for Health and Deputy Minister for Social Services.

Financial Implications - none. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government takes steps to fill the current shortage of Occupational Therapists, including ensuring that future workforce planning for Occupational Therapists takes account of the needs of local authorities.

Response: Accept in Principle

I accept this recommendation in principle as this is an issue that is the responsibility of the Minister for Health with whom I will raise the matter.

Financial Implications - these will have to be considered in discussions with cabinet colleagues.

The Committee recommends that:

The Welsh Assembly Government employs an Occupational Therapist in their Housing Department to provide valuable advice about the needs of older and disabled people.

Response: Reject

I reject this recommendation. Occupational Therapists (OT) are employed primarily by local authorities, the NHS or the private/independent sectors where their skills are put to direct, practicable use on a daily intake of clients or patients. The employment of an occupational therapist by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), as cited in the body of the report, reflects the special position of the NIHE in being a direct housing provider of such services in the Northern Ireland community. This is not replicated by other national governmental administrations in other parts of the UK. Advice on the needs of older people from the OT perspective can however be provided within the Welsh Assembly Government by its health professionals.

The College of Occupational Therapists is represented on the Essex Workstream Social Housing Grant Sub-Group, however, I would be happy to formally meet the College of Occupational Therapists on a quarterly or six-monthly basis to discuss matters impacting on the needs of older and disabled people.

In addition, I would welcome the Welsh Local Government Association's All-Wales Heads of Environmental Health Technical Panel inviting a College of Occupational Therapist representative to be a Panel member and input on this issue when appropriate. Officials in the Assembly Government Housing Directorate attend the Panel's quarterly meetings.

I would also be happy to invite the Colleague of Occupational Therapists to become members of the Housing Consultative Forum which chair on a bi-annual basis.

Financial Implications - none.

The Committee recommends that:

As part of the Older People's Strategy, the Welsh Assembly Government reviews the home maintenance services that are available and identify the minimum standards that people can consistently expect in relation to home maintenance services across Wales.

Response: Accept

I accept this recommendation. This can be undertaken in conjunction with what is proposed for Recommendation 9.

Financial implications - None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.