

Brent Council – Local authority in-house home improvement agency

Good practice themes

1. Wide range of discretionary services within Regulatory Reform Order

Context

The London borough of Brent had an estimated population of 329,000 in 2017 and the local population has a very diverse ethnic composition. Demand for housing is strong within all tenures even though housing costs are high. The owner occupied sector has reduced in size through tenure conversion to the private rented sector which now forms over 30% of the total stock. Registered providers manage more social housing stock than the local authority who has recently assumed the landlord function again after it transferred back from an arms-length management organisation.

In respect of home adaptations there has been a long track record of working innovatively and the in-house agency currently delivers assistance in all tenures. The Better Care Fund allocation for DFG is one of the highest in England at £4.34 million (2018-19) plus a further £1 million for adaptations to the council stock (approximately 4,500 dwellings). This level of funding has enabled the development of a wide range of housing related services for older and disabled people in the area.

In late 2016 an internal Outcome Based Review of the home adaptations service aimed to understand and shape demand but in the context of identifying a business case that prompt, effective delivery of assistance would confer cost efficiencies to the local health and care sectors and improve outcomes for individual disabled people. A series of recommendations helped develop a strategic and preventative approach as to how services could be structured and delivered to achieve this ambition. It involved asking the question of not just what adaptations could achieve but what the outcomes are if adaptations are not delivered in a timely fashion (waiting times), or at all (cancellations). This approach has informed the series of changes to the local service offer since that date and which continue

to be developed. Importantly it recognises that the pooled Better Care Fund represents a real opportunity to integrate the delivery of adaptations systems with health and social care to provide wrap-around support for citizens with disabilities to have a long-lasting positive demand impact.

1. Services within the Regulatory Reform Order

Local context

Adaptations and property condition

The basis of much of the adopted policy is the recognition that enabling disabled people to retain their independence for as long as possible requires more than just the provision of a mandatory disabled facilities grant but instead should consider other aspects of the home environment such as property condition, safety and energy efficiency.

The Grants Team works within the same service as Housing Enforcement who adopts a very visible approach in taking enforcement action against uncooperative landlords to remove category 1 hazards, as well ensuring that licensable properties conform with the licence conditions to support this aim. This aspect of agency working is included in the adopted housing assistance policy.

Working with the occupational therapy service

The local authority has previously undertaken Outcome Based Reviews across a range of key services including home adaptations within its scope not least because of historic delays in occupational therapist assessments being arranged in part due to high staff turnover.

The response has been to introduce an accelerated triage system directly through to the agency and the occupational therapist only assessing a need rather than how that need would be met in the property. To underpin this arrangement all technical staff in the agency are level 4 Trusted Assessors who are not necessarily required to liaise with occupational therapists especially in cases involving individuals with a 'static' rather than 'progressive' or 'degenerative' conditions.

This arrangement is particularly relevant as the majority of the occupational therapy service are occupational therapists rather than occupational therapy assistants and the Trusted Assessor training has not been designed as a substitute for highly skilled therapists but to complement and add to the total resource.

Engaging and working with cooperative private landlords

As is the common experience of service providers across England, the representation of enquiries for adaptations within the private rented sector is relatively low. In Brent the service engaged with the local Landlord Forum consisting of over 300 members, the majority of whom had very small portfolios, to determine their views on permitting adaptations. There was a high degree of support and acceptability for such modifications being undertaken.

The response of the service has been that the majority of discretionary assistance within the Private Housing Assistance Policy are available in privately rented properties and feasibility

site meetings with landlords are offered, in part to overcome any reservations they may have on providing landlord consent for works to proceed.

Components of the Private Housing Assistance Policy 2018

The full details of the policy including eligibility and conditions can be found via www.brent.gov.uk/media/16411088/phs-private-housing-assistance-policy-2018.pdf

In summary the elements of the policy comprise:

- **Mandatory disabled facilities grant** – unusually this includes a condition that upon completion of works the property must ordinarily be free of category 1 hazards. In addition there is explicit mention of the ability for applicants to self-fund elements of the scheme that are over and above what is required to meet the requisite standard requirements. Whilst this practice is not unusual it is not commonly so visibly expressed in a policy.
- **Discretionary disability adaptations grant** – for mandatory works and as a discretionary alternative to a DFG. It is not means tested and there is no prescribed upper limit for assistance as it reflects the circumstances of each case. This arrangement has been introduced on a one year trial basis and will then be reviewed dependent on its affordability and efficacy. The requirement for the property to be free from category 1 hazards remains applicable.
- **Relocation grant** – up to £5,000 to cover fees associated with a move to a more suitable property in cases where the existing home cannot be adapted and which takes account of the age and condition of that home.
- **Small works grant** – up to £7,000 in any three year period for repairs to existing adaptations or for works that will deliver significant health gains in homes occupied by vulnerable people including disabled people.
- **Spend to save grant** – for works not covered by the forms of assistance listed above but which enable a disabled person to be able to live in their home rather than entering residential care. Referrals must come from care or health professionals within Brent council or from NHS partners and include a business case to show financial saving to combined care and health budgets of the council and NHS in the following three years. A charge is placed on the property with the duration of that charge reflecting the calculated cost benefit payback period. There is no prescribed maximum financial limit.
- **Brent acute handyperson service** – this is a new in-house wrap-around service for vulnerable older disabled adults who are particularly high risk of hospital re-admission due to susceptibility to falls, have a sensory impairment, or people with long term condition(s) restricting their day functional abilities. The individuals must have responsibility for maintaining their living area, are without help or support from family or friends and cannot carry out the work themselves. Referral must be from local health and care professionals. The service is free but restricted to a maximum of six visits per year each of which would not involve more than 90 minutes work on site. Anticipated types of eligible work include minor repairs, falls and accident prevention checks and

remedy, moving beds and furniture, improvements in home safety, security and energy efficiency, fire precautions plus advice/information and relevant sign posting.

In addition there is a separately commissioned handyperson service provided by a local voluntary organisation, Elders Voice, for households not qualifying for other forms of assistance who pay for materials but not labour costs.

- **Brent hospital discharge assistance service** – up to £7000 in any three year period for vulnerable people including older disabled individuals unable to be discharged to home from hospital due to disrepair or major safety issues. This represents a prioritised route to a small works grant using the handyperson service
- **Advice service** – is available for those not qualifying for assistance and who wish to organise works.
- **Agency service** – available on a fee basis for administrative and technical assistance to ensure works via grant assistance or on a self-funded basis are properly organised and delivered.

Tenants of private landlords and housing associations can access support for mandatory disabled facilities grant, discretionary disability adaptations grant, small works grant, spend to save grant and Brent discharge assistance service. They can also access the advice and agency services.

Future developments

The Service Manager is very keen to better capture health and wellbeing outcomes arising from the delivery of the assistance policy both within satisfaction surveys and by more robust methodological approaches. Not only is it felt important to quantify outcomes arising from interventions but, in an era of uncertain future funding, being able to demonstrate the impacts on the health and social care sectors if the interventions were not undertaken. A business case project is now about to commence to hopefully address these challenges.

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