

Middlesbrough – local authority in-house home improvement agency

Good practice themes

1. Integration with health and care by providing a key contact linking to agency services
2. A comprehensive range of agency services
3. Support for self-funders

Background

Middlesbrough is a unitary authority in the North East with an estimated population of 174,000. The 2015 Index of Multiple Deprivation revealed that across the council's twenty wards six were in the most deprived 1% in England and ten were in the most deprived 10%.

Between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of households living in the PRS increased from 7.1% to 16.6%. Over the same period the numbers in owner occupation fell from 61.4% to 57.8% with those in social rented housing also falling, from 28.2% to 23.9%.

Across the local authority area over 14% of households were experiencing fuel poverty but that figure increased to 30% in some areas. The local authority fully acknowledge the scale of the challenge in ensuring that local residents can experience a better quality of life.

The Housing Strategy 2017–2020 is linked to plans for health improvement, Middlesbrough Prevention Strategy– Live Well Middlesbrough (2017–20), which in turn focuses on prevention as the best way to improve health outcomes and reduce demand for costly reactive interventions. It uses the example of how adaptations can reduce the risk of falls. The Housing Strategy has three key objectives including one 'to address the pressures of an ageing population and support vulnerable people to live independent lives for as long as possible'.

In this context the role of the local authority's **Staying Put agency** is strongly highlighted, especially in respect of adapting homes and offering solutions for older owner occupiers who wish to remain in their own homes. This is especially relevant as the Middlesbrough Local Plan indicates that between 2016–2034 over 58% of local population growth will be in the over 65 age group and 34% in the over 75 age group. There is a recognition that housing issues are strongly linked to health and care outcomes and therefore there is a need for the three sectors to work together to deliver health improvements.

1. Integration with health and care

How the service evolved

Middlesbrough Staying Put Agency was established in 1991 and is now based in Adult Social Care. In 2014 it took over the telecare contract. At that time there was already a modest link between the agency and a local hospital accident and emergency department in cases where pendant alarms were urgently required. However the agency recognised that there was significant potential to further develop such links. Consequently as a starting point the Telecare, Connect and Support Services Liaison Officer post was introduced in late 2014 and was initially based exclusively in the hospital social work team. However, the officer concerned actively pursued an approach to promote themselves and their service offer to a number of hospital based services/Depts.

This has been very successful and the officer routinely works with occupational therapists, discharge coordinators and health staff in a number of departments to help ensure that Middlesbrough residents can be discharged safely and quickly back to their homes with practical housing related support wherever possible. One notable example is that the officer works closely with the Rapid Access Frailty Assessment Unit to try and return individuals to home within 72 hours so the officer visits the wards daily to get the referral completed as quickly as possible.

In addition to their hospital based officer the Staying Put agency also has personnel based in intermediate care centres and mental health resource centres that can assist in helping individuals to return home at the right time.

How the hospital based service operates

The hospital based officer assesses for all aspects of the Staying Put agency's services and can be contacted by any of the teams or alternatively a patient, their carer or advocate can self-refer. There is an emphasis to working on a face to face basis with the patient to discuss their needs and preferences and to agree what would be the best way to assist them at home. The range of housing related support available includes telecare and other forms of assistive technology, minor and major adaptations, falls prevention measures, loans for other works and seasonal offers including winter warmth.

The completed assessment informs Staying Put agency staff what has been agreed with the patient. A write up of the ward visit is put into the patient's hospital electronic notes and a case note is entered on the social care screen so that all health and care professionals are made aware of what has been done to date and what proposals are being progressed

in terms of housing interventions to support discharge. This reduces the need for patients to repeatedly advise practitioners of the Staying Put agency's intervention which can be frustrating to patients and families, especially if they are also dealing with health decline, sometimes at a time of related family crisis, when confusion can also occur.

Outcomes

- The approach adopted in the pioneer hospital has now been broadened to Middlesbrough residents who are in other local hospital settings
- In some instances Redcar and Cleveland residents who are in a Middlesbrough hospital can be referred to Middlesbrough Staying Put for a limited range of services with Redcar and Cleveland council then paying for the works
- Discharge to home is considered to be faster because a patient's needs are identified sooner and interventions, such as adaptations, can be expeditiously arranged. Importantly the agency do not view these interventions as purely a 'task and finish' way of working but offer a follow on service for patients requiring it. This consists of a member of the agency team contacting the patient after discharge to arrange a subsequent visit to determine how well they are coping and whether there are outstanding housing related needs they can assist with.
- In terms of case volumes in a twelve month period from April 2017 – March 2018 the officer assisted over 630 patients via a wide range of agency services. One service user typically commented that:

'I have peace of mind and feel 100% safer when on my own in the home and not so vulnerable knowing a reliable service is available to me.'

2. A comprehensive range of agency services

The Staying Put agency receives about 3,000 referrals per year through a variety of routes which relate to a wide spectrum of individual needs. In order to provide a meaningful and responsive service the agency offers a comprehensive and accessible advice and information service for the service user to make an informed choice about their housing and care options.

The range of support services offered by the agency has also widened significantly in recent years, in some cases facilitated by an increase in the Better Care Fund DFG allocation. However, additional funding of up to £400k is also provided from local authority capital sources.

The Staying Put agency strives to involve service users in the review and development of services and it organises twice yearly meetings with the local Older People's Partnership.

In addition to the mainstream disabled facilities grant programme and the home from hospital scheme described above other services offered by the Staying Put agency include:

- **Addressing unsatisfactory housing conditions** – the Staying put agency officers who are fully qualified in the application of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System,

undertake home visits to identify home hazards and significant defects and then signpost to forms of support such as home assistance loans, renovation grants, emergency works or self-funded home improvements

- **Handyperson service** – the 'Middlesbrough Mobile Adapt and Mend' service carries out a wide range of minor repairs and adaptations including falls prevention measures
- **Winter warmth scheme** – available every Winter with the agency offering free advice, hats, gloves, thermal blankets, socks, shoe grippers, carbon monoxide detectors and boiler repairs and improvements. For those service users waiting for major boiler works electric heaters are provided in the interim period
- **Relocation Assistance** – this covers moves within and between housing tenures, including moves to specialist/ supported accommodation. The agency's practical help for home owners includes liaison with estate agents and solicitors to help find an alternative home and how best to sell their existing home. They also offer practical support with matters related to moving home for all tenures, such as dealing with correspondence/ utilities etc which can be very stressful especially for some older people e.g. with visual impairment, other disabilities.
- **Hoarding service** – the agency contract an individual who is very experienced in this area who can identify an individual's needs and work with them to try to change behaviour patterns. If deemed necessary and appropriate help from the agency can also be given in respect of clearance and deep cleaning. In some instances this can be essential for other services like adaptations to be provided and able to work effectively
- **Access to charitable funding sources** – agency staff are experienced in making applications to charitable sources on behalf of clients where particular needs cannot be met from in-house services
- **Fire safety** – referrals are made to the Fire service who install smoke alarms

The local authority's Regulatory Reform Order is currently being reviewed but two new types of assistance have recently been introduced

- **Small measures grant** – up to £6,000 to address a health, rather than a disability need. Referrals for this assistance must be via an occupational therapist or other relevant health or care practitioner. The most common type of work relates to heating systems
- **Social Care Funding for adaptations** – operates in cases where the required adaptation costs exceed the mandatory disabled facilities grant limit or where a high means tested contribution is likely to result in the case not progressing

In addition a Dementia Grant is currently being developed in partnership with Dementia Friends with assistance up to £3,000.

The main office occupied by the Staying Put agency has a small demonstration room containing assistive technology equipment and adaptations suitable for the home which enable the patient/ service user to 'see for real' what is involved in its provision.

3. Support for Self-Funders

In recognition that there are a number of circumstances where the self-funding route may be appropriate for addressing disrepair or adapting the home the agency still want to ensure that the building works are done properly and cost effectively. The worry for some older people of employing rogue traders is known to be a barrier to undertaking home improvement, repair or modification. In response to this challenge the agency can still offer assistance via:

- **Handyperson scheme** for works that fall outside of the prevention agenda including moving furniture, hanging pictures, installing curtain rails and assembling flat pack furniture. Some of the staff members are disabled themselves and have an insight into how assistance can be appropriately delivered
- **Private works Service** – anyone wishing to progress building works can access the agency service who help design and specify a scheme and use approved contractors. A list of Trust Marked contractors from a select list and who have signed up to a Code of Conduct and Contractor Compliance and Performance criteria is available to householders who want to arrange the works themselves
- **Home Improvement Loans** – up to £15,000 available through the local authority for those householders wishing to undertake necessary work to meet the Decent Homes Standard but who cannot access commercial lending sources. In such cases the agency can offer their services similar to the private works service listed above.

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