



Help with home adaptations: Improving local services

A 'Home Adaptation Challenge Checklist'
for older people's forums and other
stakeholders

Purpose

This guide aims to provide the lay person with a brief overview of:

- Local authorities' responsibilities for providing help with home adaptations
- What a 'good' adaptation service can/should offer
- Opportunities to improve local home adaptations provision, including a *'Home Adaptations Challenge Checklist'*

For Whom

This guide is part of a series which offers practical information and advice for local older people's forums and groups who want to influence local policy, plans and actions in relation to housing and older people.

The guide, written by *Care & Repair England*, draws on the experience of members of the *Older People's Housing Champions* network.

About the Older People's Housing Champions

The Older People's Housing Champions is a network of older activists who support action by older people's groups to improve housing and related services for an ageing population across England.

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About this Home Adaptations 'Challenge Checklist'

Living in a decent, suitable home is crucially important to a good later life.

People are living longer but increasingly living with multiple long-term health conditions and/or reductions in mobility. Home adaptations can play a critical role in enabling people with health problems and disabilities to age well and live independently in their own homes.

Whilst many people organise and pay for home adaptations themselves, many would benefit from independent advice about the most useful adaptations to make. Others would appreciate practical assistance with managing the building works, and some people need financial help with the costs of adapting their homes.

Local authorities have legal responsibilities to assist people who need adaptations to their homes. However, local councils do have considerable discretion about how they carry out their duties and the extent and quality of provision of help with home adaptations varies widely.

This Home Adaptations Challenge Checklist describes:

- The help with home adaptations that should be provided everywhere
- Examples of good home adaptation services and innovations
- Ideas for working with local authorities to improve local provision - *including a list of questions to ask about current services and a good practice checklist*



Local authorities' duties to help with home adaptations

All local authorities (County Councils, Unitary Authority and District/Borough Councils) have legal duties to help disabled people (of all ages) with home adaptations.

- **Housing authorities *must* offer mandatory, means tested grants** to help to meet the costs of essential home adaptations (Disabled Facilities Grants¹) to both home owners and tenants. Councils also have discretionary powers to help people who need home adaptations e.g. fast-tracking installation, and/or non-means tested grants for specific types of smaller adaptations.
- **Social services authorities *must* provide assistance**² with community equipment and minor adaptations (e.g. toilet frames, grab rails) as well as offering related information and advice. Social services authorities also have discretionary powers with regard to helping with the costs of home adaptations (e.g. providing loans or grants) and their occupational therapists are nearly always involved in assessing need for a Disabled Facilities Grant.

County Councils are responsible for social services, District/Borough Councils which operate within a County are responsible for housing functions, but Unitary Authorities are responsible for both social services and housing.

As both the housing authority and the social services authority are involved in DFG/home adaptations provision, good links between these two councils and their respective departments is an important first step in creating a good service. In some councils the housing and social services staff are all based in one team.

There is an increasing emphasis on local authorities, particularly those responsible for social services, working more closely with health services e.g. to prevent health decline, helping patients to live safely and well at home and maintain independence.

Similarly, the NHS Plan places significant emphasis on prevention of poor health as well as integration with social care and delivering health care at or closer to home.

Good home adaptation services can play an important role in achieving all these aims.

The national government funding towards DFG costs (which is paid to local authorities through the Better Care Fund) has doubled (2014-15/£220m compared with 2019-20/£500m) providing an opportunity to improve local provision.

¹ Defined in the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. See [Guidance](#).

² Set out in the [Care Act 2014 and Guidance](#).

What is a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG)?

- The DFG helps to pay for essential home adaptations which can give disabled people better freedom of movement into and around their homes and provide access to essential facilities within the home. Adaptations to enable bathing (e.g. level shower) and stairlifts are two of the most common types.
- DFG is a mandatory grant i.e. people have nationally defined legal rights concerning its provision. It is means tested for adults (not for children). Grant level is dependent upon savings and income but not the value of the home. Councils can put a grant repayment charge on the property.
- The housing authority usually asks social services (occupational therapy) to assess whether an adaptation is '*necessary and appropriate*' to meet the person's needs (set out in housing law) and then assesses whether a particular home adaptation is '*reasonable and practicable*'.
- Home owners and tenants have a legal right to apply for a DFG but there are often different local arrangements for social tenants e.g. adaptation agreements with social landlords. The cost of adaptations in council owned homes is met from the landlord's own budget rather than the DFG funding allocated by government.
- The mandatory DFG limit is £30,000 but councils (both social services and housing authorities) have significant discretion to provide top up adaptation grants and/or loans. How the authority chooses to use this discretion should be set out in a local policy usually described as their response to the 'Regulatory Reform Order (or RRO)'.

More details available [here](#)

What is a 'good' home adaptation service?

There is good evidence of the benefits of home adaptations. A review of the research evidence found that home adaptations improved quality of life for 90% of recipients as well as resulting in reduced costs to health and care.³

The Centre for Ageing Better published an international review of the academic evidence⁴ about the impacts of home adaptations carried out for older people which concluded that:

- **Speedy provision of home adaptations is important** - *delays in installing adaptations can reduce their effectiveness.*
- **Adaptations that meet the priorities of the individual work best** - *there is good evidence that greatest outcomes are achieved when individuals, families and carers are closely involved in the decision-making process, focusing on individual goals and what a person wants to achieve in the home.*

Turning 'What's wrong' to 'What's right'

The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGO) investigates complaints about councils and social care providers. Some of the main reported criticisms of, complaints about and reported problems with local authorities' home adaptations services include:

- **Lack of information** - about what adaptations are even possible, let alone the availability of financial assistance e.g. the DFG, or help to organise the building work.
- **Complicated and slow** - even when they find out about adaptations / DFG, many disabled people find the process of obtaining help very difficult to manage and there can be very long delays, sometimes running to many months, or even years.
- **Conflicting perspectives** - differences between what a disabled person wants and expects with regard to adaptations in their home vs the adaptation that the OT assesses as being '*necessary and appropriate*' emerges as an area of considerable dispute in LGO cases.
- **Unsatisfactory building works** - Poor workmanship and delays in completion.

³ Heywood, FS & Turner, L, (2007) *Better outcomes, lower costs* Office for Disability Issues, University of Bristol and Department for Work and Pension

⁴ Powell, J. et al (2017) *The role of home adaptations in improving later life* Centre for Ageing Better, London

What home adaptations service 'good practice' should include has been debated by the Older People's Housing Champions network members who considered the question:

'From a personal perspective what are the key factors that would/does make a good adaptations service?'*

*This could be either adaptations that you pay for yourself or where you need them to be paid for with a grant/loan/provided free of charge.

The resulting good practice adaptation/ service features are set out in the table below.

Adaptation Factor	Good adaptation service feature(s) needed
Suitable	Access to impartial/independent information and advice about what adaptation(s) would suit me best (including for self-funders)
Transparent	Easy to find out about the adaptations help available, open and clear process, clear pricing, good communication
Simple	Easy to get the adaptation help I need; professionals listen to what I want / need / my priorities
Speedy	I get the adaptation I require when I need it - delivery / installation is fast & efficient
Trustworthy	Good job done well by a reputable contractor at a reasonable price

This list has many similarities with the nationally recognised, technical Disabled Facilities Grants Good Practice Guide⁵ for practitioners (and which is referred to in complaints to the Local Government Ombudsman concerning DFG).

⁵ Home Adaptations Consortium (2013, updated 2015) Home Adaptations for Disabled People: *A detailed guide to related legislation, guidance and good practice*

A digest of the key factors of good practice that this Guide lists is set out below.

Home Adaptations Good Practice Delivery Features

- Awareness raising, outreach and providing accessible information about adaptations
- Good communication with service users
- Integration with health and care
- Triage / fast-track initiatives
- Flexibility to reflect individual requirements and circumstances
- Help for self-funders
- Planning and forecasting demand
- Allocation of sufficient financial and staff resources to meet need
- Systems to evaluate health and care outcomes
- Links to 'added value' services
- Culture of continuous improvement.

These sources of information all informed the 'Challenge Checklist' in the last section of this document.

Local examples of home adaptations good practice

A recent good practice report, *Adapting for ageing: Good practice and innovation in home adaptations*⁶, identified a range of local innovations and good practice examples with regard to helping older people with home adaptations.

The views and priorities of older people concerning provision of home adaptations plus the national good practice guide (both noted above) were key to defining which features contribute to making a good home adaptations service.

The report includes detailed descriptions of 24 local exemplars and provides links to the related local councils' housing assistance policies (where available).

Below are a few (condensed) illustrative examples.

Good practice feature: Raising awareness about home adaptations

The home improvement agencies (HIAs) in Manchester (Care & Repair), West of England (WECR), Middlesbrough (Staying Put) and Cornwall (Home Solutions) have been at the forefront of pro-active awareness raising about home adaptations, alternative housing options, repairs assistance, finances etc. In some places older volunteers are involved in this outreach, giving talks and running housing information sessions in a wide range of settings e.g. at older people's groups/meetings, medical centres/hospitals etc.

Oxford City HIA has undertaken a major local publicity campaign to raise awareness of possible home modifications and related services. In Rochdale the HIA pro-actively contacted past recipients of DFGs for stairlifts to offer help with repair/replacement/related assistance.

Independent Living Centres, where older and disabled people can view possible home adaptations and equipment and access a range of related services, are operating in Knowsley (Knowsley Centre for Independent Living) and Bristol (WECR Home Independence Centre).

“People actually don’t know that these services are out there. And also how to access them. You don’t get taught, at any point in your life, how to become an older person. It just sort of happens, you know, if you have a child, you’ve got your health visitor and they explain what you’re supposed to do. You become old and no one is there telling you.”

Source: Centre for Ageing Better (2018) Homes that Help

⁶ Centre for Ageing Better (2018) *Adapting for ageing: Good practice and innovation in home adaptations*
London Centre for Ageing Better

Good practice feature: Speedy delivery of home adaptations

Many of the good practice local areas identified in the report had introduced some of these features as a way of speeding up home adaptations' installation.

- **Non-means tested, fast track grants** for adaptations under a certain value (between £5,000 to £8,000) and/or particular adaptation type (e.g. stairlifts, bathing)
- **Faster assessment of adaptation need** - by making better use of occupational therapists' (OT) time, training other staff to assess e.g. OT assistants or trusted assessors
- **Innovation to speed up adaptation completion** - e.g. block contracting of equipment/particular adaptations such as the **Newcastle** equipment loan scheme, **Sunderland** block contracting of stairlifts and other equipment.

Good practice feature: Setting an adequate budget

Peterborough City Council commissioned an assessment of the housing stock in terms of current accessibility, its adaptability and new build accessible homes requirement based on local population projections. The resulting findings gave home adaptations a more prominent position in strategic planning (and budget setting) across housing, health and care.

In Middlesbrough the Housing Strategy 2017-2020 is closely linked to plans for health improvement, which in turn focuses on prevention. In both policies the role of home adaptations and the services delivered by the local authority's Staying Put agency are strongly highlighted.

Good practice feature: Integration with health and care, prevention

- **A specific fast track home adaptation grant to speed up hospital discharge** - e.g. Brent, Brighton & Hove, Bristol, North Kesteven, Oxford, Peterborough, Rochdale, Scarborough & Ryedale
- **Introduction of faster adaptation processing for hospital patients** - e.g. Cornwall, North Kesteven, St Helens
- **Location of home adaptation / DFG staff in hospitals** - e.g. Cornwall, Middlesbrough, Norfolk, WECR, West Kent. **Manchester** Care & Repair has contracts with the Manchester hospitals to contact every older person who is discharged from hospital to their own home, offering practical support services, including housing related interventions / adaptations / repairs / safety & falls checks / alternative housing advice etc.
- **Emergency intervention/ linked adaptation to avoid hospital admission after a fall** - e.g. St Helens Hospital Avoidance Car.

Good practice feature: Fast adaptations installation via handyperson service

Handyperson services providing low cost, accessible, direct help with minor adaptations and small repairs are very popular with older people and have a high cost benefit profile⁷. Many of the good practice localities support handyperson services to deliver minor adaptations. Such schemes are increasingly linked to hospital discharge / fast track interventions, often undertaking free home safety checks and carrying out the prevention measures at the same time as installing the originally requested home adaptation (e.g. Brent, Brighton & Hove, Middlesbrough).

Note: For other good practice examples see: [Foundations](#), the company commissioned by government to improve DFG delivery.

Home Adaptations Challenge Checklist

One way in which local older people's groups and other stakeholders can help to support and encourage local authorities to review and improve home adaptations provision is to ask searching questions and ideally take part in a review of services.

The following suggested 'Home Adaptations Challenge Checklist' is based on the Home Adaptations Good practice definitions and examples described above.

Adaptation Factor	Question(s)
<p>Overarching questions about service planning</p>	<p>How well is home adaptations provision working in your area?</p> <p><i>Is the scale of local need for adaptations known?</i></p> <p><i>Is local adaptation need being met?</i></p> <p><i>How long are disabled people waiting for adaptations help?</i></p> <p><i>How satisfied are the adaptation service users?</i></p> <p><i>Are older / disabled people involved in shaping / reviewing local adaptation services?</i></p> <hr/> <p>Has the local authority taken advantage of their wide-ranging powers (and additional government money) to innovate and improve delivery of home adaptations help?</p> <p><i>Have they reviewed and published information about their home adaptation policies and systems, including their Housing Assistance Policy?</i></p> <p><i>Is home adaptations improved delivery part of local authority planning, including Adult and Children's Services, the local Housing Strategy etc.?</i></p> <p><i>Are home adaptations part of the discussions about NHS and care integration, e.g. joint commissioning, Better Care Fund plan, Public Health, prevention etc.?</i></p>
<p>Connecting home adaptations with health services</p>	<p>Could your local home adaptations provision be improved and better integrated with health services? (e.g. to speed up delivery, linked to hospital discharge and dementia pathways etc)</p> <p><i>As the focus of the NHS moves to prevention, have pro-active home adaptations e.g. to prevent falls, avoid hospital admission etc. been considered?</i></p>
<p>Setting an adequate budget</p>	<p>Is all of the money that national government has given to the council specifically for Disabled Facilities Grants being used for adaptations?</p> <p><i>What is the amount of the local budget compared with this national grant?</i></p> <p><i>How much local money (e.g. from housing, social services, health) going into the local home adaptations / DFG budget?</i></p> <p><i>Has there been any attempt to work out if the budget is sufficient to meet local needs?</i></p>

Adaptation Factor	Question(s)
Questions about specific aspects of good home adaptations practice	
Reaching people who could benefit from home adaptations	<p>Do local residents know about possible home adaptations and the potential benefits to their health and wellbeing?</p> <p><i>Do many / most people (both tenants and home owners) know about the adaptations help available, including funds for those who can't afford to pay?</i></p> <p><i>What is the local authority (and its partners) doing to raise awareness about home adaptations and to reach those in greatest need?</i></p> <p><i>What is the local arrangement for providing impartial information and advice about home adaptations, alternative housing, care options & linked finances?</i></p>
Efficient, fast and effective help with home adaptations	<p>How easy is it to get help with home adaptations and are they delivered quickly and efficiently?</p> <p><i>Does the local authority have fast track systems to ensure that straight forward home adaptations can be assessed rapidly then carried out quickly and efficiently?</i></p> <p><i>Are there services in place that can help the older and disabled people who need help to navigate the grant system and to organise the building work, such as a home improvement agency service?</i></p> <p><i>Have the national good practice ideas been considered for local application e.g. simplified / non-means tested targeted grants for lower cost, simple adaptations, block contracts to bring down unit costs on some of the more common adaptations?</i></p>
Alternative housing options	<p>What advice and assistance is offered to people when their homes cannot be adapted to meet their needs?</p> <p><i>Is there assistance to help people find and move to a more suitable home?</i></p> <p><i>Is funding being made available (as part of the DFG budget) to help people move to more a suitable property that better meets their needs?</i></p>
Help for tenants	<p>How are disabled people who live in social rented or private rented homes being helped with home adaptations?</p> <p><i>Are social housing providers helping their tenants with home adaptations? Have local agreements to share responsibilities been considered?</i></p> <p><i>Where the local authority still has its own council housing stock, are adaptation systems working well for their tenants?</i></p> <p><i>What help is available to private tenants who face difficulties with adaptations?</i></p>

Adaptation Factor	Question(s)
Connections to housing disrepair	<p>Where a person who needs home adaptations also has significant repair problems, are there systems in place to address that disrepair?</p> <p><i>Is the authority supporting a local home improvement agency and/or handyperson service which can help with home repairs?</i></p> <p><i>Have any of the innovative good practice ideas e.g. repairs on prescription, social prescribing of home modifications to improve health etc. been considered?</i></p>
Independent arbitration?	<p>Is there a clear process for people to appeal against a decision regarding their request for a DFG?</p> <p><i>Is this appeal system transparent and made clear to applicants?</i></p> <p><i>Is local independent help available to support people who wish to appeal?</i></p>

Disclaimer

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About Care & Repair England

Care & Repair England is an independent charitable organisation (Registered Society with Charitable Status Reg No 25121R) established in 1986 which aims to improve older people's housing. It aims to innovate, develop, promote and support practical housing initiatives and the related policy and practice which enable older people to live independently in their own homes for as long as they wish, particularly for older people living in poor or unsuitable private sector housing.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for their support for this briefing as part of a programme of work by Care & Repair England to enable more marginalised older people to influence decision making about housing and related services.

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Published 2019
Designed by The Design Box