

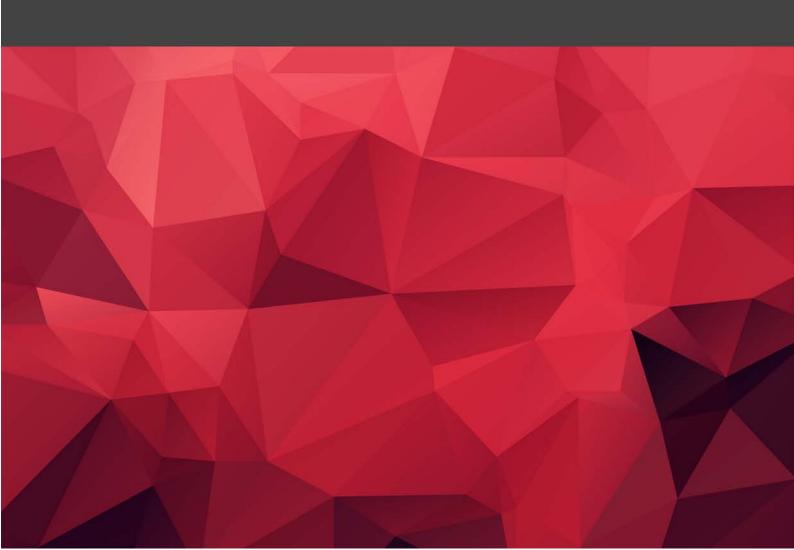
# Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru Auditor General for Wales

# Review of the Housing Adaptations and Disabled Facilities Grants Service – **Pembrokeshire County Council**

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The team who delivered the work comprised Euros Lake, Ron Price, Alison Lewis and Jeremy Evans under the direction of Huw Rees.

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# Summary report

## **Summary**

- When making applications for housing adaptations and disabled facilities grants, as for many local government services, users do not have a choice of service provider. As there is no alternative service provider, the ability of service users to influence services relies on 'voice' rather than 'choice'. This means that ensuring the views of service users are heard is important when designing and delivering services and interventions aimed at meeting people's needs.
- The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a requirement on local authorities and other public bodies to have regard for the sustainable development principle and the five ways of working that define it. 'Involvement' is one of the five ways of working identified in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- The Welsh Government's Local Government White Paper also highlights the importance of working in partnership with citizens:
  - We want to develop a more equal partnership with citizens. The role of public services should be to support people to live independent lives and to seek to de-escalate demand, intervening only when necessary and only for as long as required. In doing so, the focus inevitably shifts to prevention and a public service which is able to put more effort into helping people to avoid crisis, rather than one which is focused on supporting people in crisis. This is about creating prudent public services for the future.'1
- 4 So in 2017-18, the Wales Audit Office committed to undertake work to understand the 'service user perspective' at every council within Wales. We followed a broadly similar approach at each council but agreed the specific focus and approach to the work individually. In Pembrokeshire County Council (the Council) we linked this work to the review we were undertaking in the housing adaptations and disabled facilities grants service. In particular, whether the Council was using the experiences and aspirations of service users to inform the design and delivery of services.
- We engaged with a sample of service users through a telephone survey in December 2017 and January 2018. This helped us understand their perspective. In total we called 140 service users who had received disabled facilities grants or disabled small works grants between April 2016 and October 2017. We completed 57 surveys. A summary of the survey results is attached at Appendix 1.
- This information, as well as a review of the Council's documents and the data on performance, informed our discussions with the Council. This helped us understand the Council's view of the current arrangements for dealing with housing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Welsh Government, **White Paper Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed**, January 2017.

- adaptations, and how the Council approaches and responds to the needs and expectations of service users.
- During 2016-17 the Council completed 154 housing adaptation grants. 57 were disabled facilities grants and 97 were disabled small works grants<sup>2</sup>. In 2016-17 the Council spent £960,000 on these housing adaptations. The Private Sector Housing Team that deliver this service is part of the Housing and Revenues Department within the Council's Finance Directorate. The team comprises of: Private Sector Housing and Housing Strategy Manager, occupational therapists, grant inspectors and administration staff.
- We found that 'Most service users we spoke to were happy with the housing adaptation service but the Council has not defined strategic aims or standards for the service and is not focused enough on positive, safe outcomes for service users.' We came to this conclusion because:
  - most service users are happy with the housing adaptations service but the Council is not setting or communicating service standards;
  - the Council has successfully reduced the time taken to deliver housing adaptations but could provide greater support for applicants and focus more on delivering safe outcomes for service users; and
  - information on the housing adaptations service is not up-to-date or sufficiently accessible.

## Proposals for Improvement

9 The table below contains our proposals for improvement for the ways in which the Council could improve its housing adaptations and disabled facilities grants service.

### Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Exhibit summary: Proposals for improvement for the ways in which the Council could improve its housing adaptations and disabled facilities grants service.

### **Proposals for Improvement**

P1 Define the strategic aims for the housing adaptations service with a focus on the service user.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Disabled facilities grants and disabled small works grants help towards the cost of adapting a home to enable a disabled person to continue to live there. Disabled small works grants are for works costing between £1,000 and £5,000. Disabled facilities grants are for works costing over £5,000 up to a usual maximum award of £36,000.

### **Proposals for Improvement**

- P2 Engage with: service users, staff and other stakeholders to identify ways in which the housing adaptations service can be improved.
- P3 Revise the information provided on housing adaptations to make it clear, accessible and widely available to service users and potential service users.
- P4 Create and publicise service standards for the housing adaptations
- P5 Improve the level of support provided to applicants throughout the housing adaptations process. In particular:
  - review the arrangements for appointing and managing building contractors;
  - improve the process for ensuring the adaptation meets the needs of service users and their families; and
  - strengthen safeguarding arrangements for service users throughout the housing adaptation process.
- The Wales Audit Office has also undertaken a national study looking at housing adaptations. Some of the recommendations arising from this national report<sup>3</sup> would be relevant for consideration by the Council in any review of the housing adaptations service it undertakes. For information the recommendations from the national report are attached in Appendix 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Wales Audit Office, **Housing Adaptations**, 22 February 2018, http://www.audit.wales/system/files/publications/housing-adaptations-2018-english.pdf

# **Detailed report**

Most service users we spoke to were happy with the housing adaptations service but the Council has not defined strategic aims or standards for the service and is not focused enough on positive, safe outcomes for service users

Most service users are happy with the housing adaptations service but the Council is not setting or communicating service standards

- In our survey of service users, 95% of those we spoke to were satisfied with the overall quality of the housing adaptations service provided by the Council.

  However, because the service does not have standards relating to the quality and expected performance of the service, users have nothing to evaluate the service against.
- The Council has not defined the strategic aims for the housing adaptations service. The Council's Housing and Revenue Services Service Transformation Plan 2017-18 has limited information about this service. There are only two performance indicators for the adaptations function contained in the plan:
  - the average number of calendar days to deliver a disabled facilities grant or a disabled small works grant and;
  - the percentage of applicants surveyed who stated the disabled adaptation service was good or excellent.

There are no performance measures in the plan focused on outcomes for service users

Engagement with service users and stakeholders in improving the housing adaptations service is limited. The service has made some positive changes to the service. For example, at the start of the process of applying for a housing adaptation, the Council send an occupational therapist to help identify service user's needs. In our survey 80% of service users felt that their needs, views and wishes were fully taken into account when their need for an adaptation was assessed by the Council. Sixteen per cent thought that their needs were partly taken into account and 4% thought that they were not taken into account. Another positive aspect of using occupational therapist at the initial point of contact is that they can establish where an applicant might be able to get improvements to their home done as a minor adaptation. If this is possible, it makes the process simpler and quicker for the applicant as they do not have to go through the full disabled facilities grants application process. The Council is also seeking to make more use of 'Trusted Assessors'. Trusted Assessors are staff who can assess the basic

needs of a potential service user but who are not fully trained occupational therapists. Training has been provided to some staff, but this arrangement is not yet fully in place, and as a result, Trusted Assessors are only used selectively.

# The Council has successfully reduced the time taken to deliver housing adaptations but could provide greater support for applicants and focus more on delivering safe outcomes for service users

- In our telephone survey with service users 84% of the people we spoke to were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with the time it took the Council to approve their housing adaptation. The housing adaptations service has concentrated its efforts on reducing processing times and on improving performance on individual steps in the process. It has been successful in reducing the time taken to deal with applications. Up to the end of quarter three of 2017-18 the total approval time (average number of days to complete works) had fallen to 230 days, compared to an average of 276 days in 2016-17. The Welsh average for the number of days it took to get a Disabled Facilities Grant in 2016-17 was 224 days. While the time for initial assessments in Pembrokeshire has remained static, times to process the application have fallen significantly, as has the time between grant approval and completing works. The fall in the time taken is important in minimising the risks to service users in living safely and independently at home.
- In our survey, while 76% of those we spoke to found the application process easy, 24% of service users did not. The Council operates a system that places the responsibility on applicants to manage their way through the application process. The Council aims to provide a clear point of contact for any queries a service user might have through the application process and assigns a named grant officer to each grant. However, only 71% of those we surveyed felt that they were given a clear point of contact.
- The service does not use available information to try to shape future outcomes. For example, there are significant numbers of cancellations within the service. The Council does not analyse these cancellations to find out why people expressing an initial need for help do not then pursue an application through to completion.
- 17 Sixty-one per cent of those we spoke to rated the Council's assistance with appointing building contractors as good or very good. In the Council's process it is the applicant's responsibility to appoint the building contractor to deliver the housing adaptation. Some applicants (or the family members who were supporting them with the application) were positive about being able to use building contractors of their own choice. Others were critical of the approach and told us that they had found this difficult. Difficulties highlighted included: getting contractors to quote for work and dealing with technical information given by contractors. Many applicants said that they had relied on family members to support them through the process. From a service user's perspective the Council's approach to the

- appointment of building contractors does not appear to be meeting the needs of all applicants. Whilst the Council state that they will provide support to service users through the application process this is potentially not being communicated effectively to service users.
- 18 The Council provides a list of building contractors the service user can choose from. The Council has not applied any suitability checks to this list. While the Council states that it is not a list of verified and approved contractors, there is a great risk that service users would think this was a list of Council approved contractors. Indeed, Council officers conceded that this is often the case. If the Council were to create an approved contractor list then it would then go through a formal process to assess the suitability of contractors to undertake adaptations prior to inclusion on the list. The criteria the Council might apply to assessing the suitability of contractors would be for it to define, but may include issues such as: standards of customer care; vetting of financial standing, tax and VAT status; promoting good health and safety practices; ensuring that adequate insurance is held; and requiring references. In deciding if contractors are suitable the Council may also want to consider whether contractor staff working in the homes of vulnerable people may be in situations that could be interpreted as regulated activity and therefore covered by a requirement for Disclosure and Barring Services checks. The Council has not introduced a formal system for accrediting contractors to undertake adaptations and has not recognised this as a risk. The Council needs to be more focused on its wider duty of care to ensure safe outcomes for vulnerable service users.
- Officers reported there were challenges in getting adaptation works done because of a limited number of contractors and a lack of capacity in the building sector in Pembrokeshire. The Council has done little to address this challenge, such as: following strategic commissioning principles to expand the market, guarantee work, or use its own direct labour organisation. The Council planned to introduce an internal agency to procure housing adaptation work during quarter one of 2017-18 but it did not achieve this.
- In our survey, we asked service users if the adaptation they had received had helped them with their needs. Ninety-six per cent reported that it had. In our survey 43% of those we spoke to said they had not received follow-up contact from the Council to check whether the adaptation was meeting their needs. The Council does issue customer feedback surveys to all those that have received an adaptation. The survey that the Council is currently using is one that Welsh Government has asked them to use and it does not ask service users whether the adaptation is meeting their needs (the Council's previous survey did include this question). When adaptations have been completed they are inspected by a grants inspector who will check the works done and undertake some basic testing. The Council also state that service users will be asked as part of this inspection if they have used the facilities and if they are happy with the work (there is no written record of this survey that is undertaken). Whilst the grant inspector undertaking this work might ask the question about whether the adaptation is meeting the service

user's need there is no formal check from someone suitably qualified that the adaptation is: fit for purpose, remains appropriate to the needs of the applicant (circumstances may have changed whilst waiting for the adaptation) or that the service user has been properly instructed in how to use the adaptation and is using it correctly. A visit by an occupational therapist after the adaptation is complete, confirming it has met their needs, is one-way the Council could assure itself the adaptation has provided a positive, safe outcome for the service user. Limitations in occupational therapist capacity is one reason the service gave for why it cannot follow-up all grant applicants. The service has been able to increase capacity in the occupational therapist team during the last two years but capacity issues remain.

# Information on the housing adaptations service is not up-to-date or sufficiently accessible

- 21 It is a challenge for the Council to make sure that those in potential need of the housing adaptations service are aware of it. The Council needs to ensure that information about the housing adaptations service is available in places where people who may need the service can see it. Most service users that we spoke to found out about the service through contact with health services or social services or through their family members.
- The Council has promoted other ways of reaching potential service users. For example, the Council funds 'Community Connectors' who are employed by Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services to identify people in the community who may not be in regular contact with support services or living in isolated circumstances. Using 'Community Connectors' is a good way of letting eligible people know about available grants and of helping those who may not have close relatives to help them in the process. The Council also works in partnership with other organisations, including Mid and West Wales Fire Service, who, in responding to slips, trips and falls can advise potential service users of adaptations the Council could provide.
- The Council needs to improve the quality of the information about the service that is available to service users. The service does not provide potential service users with up-to-date information or leaflets. Some fact sheets are available on the Council website, but these do not contain user-friendly information and are out-of-date. In general the Council's website is effective in signposting the housing adaptations service, with only a few steps needed to gain information about the service. However, ease of access is let down by the quality of the information once the user has reached the right page. The Council accepts the customer fact sheets on the website and those given to customers are out-of-date and need replacement. This is a defined action in the Council's service improvement plan but is not complete.
- Due to the potential vulnerability and access needs of applicants, 'user-friendly' information is very important. The Council needs to ensure key information about

adaptations and how to access these is available in various formats including both online and hard copy. The information needs to be written in plain English and Welsh. The Council also needs to ensure the information is available in accessible versions, including: large font, audio and where needed other languages relevant to the locality.

# Appendix 1

Exhibit 2: summary results from the survey undertaken with service users who had received a housing adaptation from Pembrokeshire County Council



## OUSING AD

People in society are now living longer and many have a range of complex needs. Public bodies in Wales must help people to live as independently as possible. As people's needs change over time, their homes often need to change too so that they can continue to lead safe and healthy lifestyles.

We asked a number of people who have received a housing adaptation from Pembrokeshire County Council what they thought of the service. Here's what they had to say...

Finding the right help when applying can be crucial to recieving the right type of adaptation...



of those we spoke to felt their views and wishes were fully taken into account when their need for an adaptation was assessed by the council

The majority of those who we spoke to are happy with the service provided by Pembrokeshire County Council



of those we spoke to were satisfied with the overall quality of the housing adaptation service provided by the Council



of people we spoke to were satisfied with the amount of time it took for the Council to approve their housing adaptation

Applying for a housing adaptation in Pembrokeshire

And

76% of those we spoke to found the application process easy



My mother had people coming out with technical

However, many elderly people depend on their

children or others to deal with the Council on their behalf. The information provided about the service needs to be tailored, user friendly and considerate

of the audience's needs.

information and it just overwhelmed her. If she didn't have anybody to help her, then her house wouldn't have been adapted.

felt they were given a clear point of contact who could answer any queries they may have



Some felt that more could be done to make people aware of the options...

I feel we would do things differently if we had known more about the options and feel we could have made better use of the money

Service users had mixed views about the help the Council gave them in appointing a builder to do the work on their homes...

And not many people are being asked whether the adaptation they've been given is meeting their needs...



61%

of those we spoke to rated the Council's assistance as good or very good

The list of builders was very helpful. I appreciated that I could choose my own builder from the list given to me by the Council

The Council didn't help with appointing a builder - you just have to get on with it

The Council should come round and check more regularly. They only came out and checked when a bill was sent by the builder - they didn't visit me while the work was being done and I was left to deal with things



**43**%

of those who we spoke to had not received follow-up contact from the Council to check whether the adaptation provided was meeting their needs

The Council checked that the work was done but no one has been to check if it meets my needs



Read the full report on Pembrokeshire County Council's housing adaptations service on our website – www.audit.wales

This survey was delivered as telephone interviews by Wales Audit Office staff during December 2017 and January 2018. We spoke to 57 people who had been provided with a housing adaptation during the period April 2016 to October 2017. This represents around 25% of all those who received a housing adaptation from the Council during this time. The results are based on the number of responses received to each question.

# Appendix 2

Exhibit 3: recommendations from the Wales Audit Office national report on **Housing Adaptations**, 22 February 2018

#### Navigate to the full report here

#### Recommendations

- R1 There are many sources of funding and policies for adaptations, which results in disabled and older people receiving very different standards of service (paragraphs 1.5 to 1.9). To address these discrepancies we recommend that the Welsh Government set standards for all adaptations to ensure disabled and older people receive the same standard of service irrespective of where they live, who their landlord is and whether they own their own home.
- R2 Most public bodies are clear on how their work on adaptations can positively impact on disabled and older people, and have set suitable aims that provide focus for action. For adaptations, having the right strategic goals also establishes a clear basis for decision-making on who should be prioritised for services and how and where to use resources. However, we found that current policy arrangements have a number of deficiencies and public bodies are not maximising the benefit of their investment (paragraphs 3.8 to 3.15). We recommend that local authorities work with partner agencies (health bodies, housing associations and Care and Repair) to strengthen their strategic focus for the provision of adaptations by:
- 1. setting appropriate strategic objectives for adaptations that focus on wellbeing and independence;
- 2. improving the quality of information on the demand for adaptations by using a wide range of data to assess need including drawing on and using information from partners who work in the local-authority area; and
- 3. linking the system for managing and delivering adaptations with adapted housing policies and registers to make best use of already adapted homes.
- R3 Ensuring that all those who might need an adaptation have all the information they need in order to apply for and receive an adaptation is important. Good-quality and accessible information is therefore essential for delivery organisations to demonstrate fair access and transparency. However, we identified weaknesses in the quality and coverage of public information relating to housing adaptations (paragraphs 2.6 to 2.15). We recommend that delivery organisations provide information on housing adaptations in both Welsh and English, and accessible formats including braille, large fonts, audio versions and other languages. Information should be promoted widely via a range of media including social media, websites and published information, and also through key partners. Preferably, information should be produced jointly and policies aligned between delivery bodies to improve coverage and usage.

## Recommendations

- R4 Given the wide number of routes into services, delivery organisations need to ensure they have robust systems to deal effectively and quickly with applications. However, we found that the processes used by delivery organisations vary widely and often create difficulties for disabled and older people seeking assistance (paragraphs 2.16 to 2.19). We recommend that delivery organisations streamline applications by creating single comprehensive application forms covering all organisations within a local-authority area that are available via partners and online.
- R5 Delivery of adaptations can be delayed by a variety of factors (paragraphs 2.20 to 2.33). To improve timeliness in delivery we recommend that:
- 4. the Welsh Government reviews whether local authorities should contniue to use the means test for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs);
- 5. local authorities provide or use home improvement agency services to support disabled and older people to progress their DFG applications efficiently;
- 6. delivery organsiations work with planning authorities to fast track and stremaline adaptations that require approvals;
- 7. delivery organisations use Trusted Assessors to undertake less complex adaptation assessments; and
- 8. the Welsh Government streamlines its approval processes for Physical Adaptation Grants (PAGs).
- R6 Most local authorities, housing associations and Care and Repair agencies have established processes to appoint, oversee and manage builder and/or contractor performance. However, we found wide variations in how delivery organisations arrange, contract and deliver building works (paragraphs 2.37 to 2.44). We recommend that delivery organisations:
- 9. introduce formal systems for accrediting contractors to undertake adaptations. These should include:
  - standards of customer care such as keeping to appointments, keeping the site tidy, controlling noise etc;
  - vetting of financial standing, tax and VAT status;
  - o promoting good health and safety practices;
  - o requiring the use of warranty schemes;
  - o ensuring that adequate insurance is held; and
  - o requiring references.
- 10. use framework agreements and partnered contracts to deliver adaptations.
- 11. address weaknesses in the contracting of adaptations, updating Schedule of Rates used to tender work and undertaking competitive tendering to support value for money in contracting.
- 12. develop effective systems to manage and evaluate contractor performance by:
  - setting an appropriate range of information to judge performance and delivery of works covering timeliness of work; quality of work; applicant/tenant feedback; cost of work (including variations); health and safety record; and customer feedback;

### Recommendations

- regularly reporting and evaluating performance to identify opportunities to improve services; and
- providing formal feedback to contractors on their performance covering key issues such as client satisfaction, level and acceptability of variations, right first-time work, post-inspection assessment and completion within budget and on time.
- R7 Maximising impact and value for money in provision of adaptations requires effective joint working between housing organisations and health and social care services to ensure the needs of often very vulnerable people can be met, and their quality of life improved. However, our findings highlight that delivery organisations continue to have a limited strategic focus on adaptations, concentrating on organisational specific responses rather than how best collectively to meet the needs of disabled or older people (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.21). We recommend that local authorities work with partner agencies (health bodies, housing associations and Care and Repair) to develop and improve joint working to maximise both take-up and the benefits of adaptations in supporting independence by pooling of resources, collocating staff and creating integrated delivery teams.
- R8 Most public bodies recognise the value of adaptations in reducing the risk of falls, preventing hospital admissions and speeding up discharge from hospital. However, the importance of adaptations is not always reflected in local partnership arrangements and outside of Occupational Therapists, health professionals noted that the different local-authority and housing-association systems for administering, approving and delivering adaptations are difficult to navigate (paragraphs 3.22 to 3.24). To enhance take-up and usage of adaptations with health bodies we recommend that delivery organisations jointly agree and publish joint service standards for delivery of adaptations within each local-authority area. The service standards should clearly set out how each agency approaches delivery of adaptations and how they will provide services to ensure people know what they are entitled to receive. Service Standards should:
- 13. be written in plain accessible language;
- 14. be precise about what people can and cannot expect to receive;
- 15. be produced collaboratively to cover all adaptations services within an area;
- 16. set out the eligibility for the different funding streams, application and assessment processes, timescales and review processes; and
- 17. offer the viable options and alternatives for adaptations including linking with adapted housing registers to maximise use of already adapted homes.
- R9 Having the right performance indicators and regularly reporting performance against these are important for public bodies to manage operational performance, identify areas of improvement and evaluating the positive impact of services. We found that the current range of performance indicator data is extremely limited and not sufficient to enable a full evaluation of performance (paragraphs 4.5 to 4.20). To effectively manage performance and be able to

### Recommendations

judge the impact of adaptations, we recommend that the Welsh Government and delivery organisations:

- 18. set appropriate measures to judge both the effectiveness and efficiency of the different systems for delivering adaptations and the impact on wellbeing and independence of those who receive adaptations;
- 19. ensure delivery organisations report against their responsibilities in respect of the Equalities Act 2010;
- 20. ensure performance information captures the work of all delivery organisations local authorities, housing associations and Care and Repair agencies; and
- 21. annually publish performance for all delivery organisations to enable a whole systems view of delivery and impact to support improvement to be taken.

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