

Improving home improvement services: challenges in recruitment and retention

A Good Home Network learning output

This briefing summarises the discussions of the first Good Home Network meeting and outlines some of the key issues concerning resource challenges – recruitment and retention, staffing structures and accessing funding.

Housing officers, local government managers and Home Improvement Agency staff came together to share their insights, support each other and find solutions to some of the challenges they face. Further meetings of the Good Home Network are planned throughout the year.

What is the Good Home Network?

The Good Home Network is a hub for active learning connecting people from different areas across England who are exploring ways to improve poor-quality homes in their communities.

To help local authorities ensure people in their communities can live independently, safely and with dignity in their own homes, the Centre for Ageing Better has set up the Good Home Network, in partnership with Foundations.

While what works in one local authority may not always be transferable to another place with a different structure and different local circumstances, members see the value in sharing lessons learned and challenges faced to improve and build good practice.

To find out more, visit <https://ageing-better.org.uk/good-home-network> or email goodhomenetwork@ageing-better.org.uk

Recruitment and retention

Issues

- It is difficult to recruit and attract suitable staff with Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) experience across various roles (technical surveyors and officers, occupational therapists (OTs), surveyors, assessors, case workers) resulting in staff shortages and the need to train up or incentivise/upgrade posts. There are shortages of staff across various roles in many areas but there are particular issues with recruiting surveyors and OTs. Where these posts are left unfilled there can be bottlenecks in service delivery. And when these services have to be commissioned externally, service delivery can be reduced due to the high cost of buying in their expertise.

- Recruiting surveyors is a particular challenge as there is no national job specification or recognition of the role of DFG surveyor and many surveyors do not understand DFGs. There have been instances of recruitment taking up to two years, with fruitless searches and time-consuming interview processes.
- Local authorities are competing against the private sector and are unlikely to be able to match them on pay, bonuses and perks. In addition, local authority pay scales are typically lower than agency rates which makes attracting staff to join teams as permanent team members difficult. Some areas have done work to re-grade certain roles so that they are more competitive in their locality.
- With the cost-of-living increase, people can no longer afford to take on a job below certain a salary level and so it is harder to attract people based on the nature of the role and the pull of altruism.
- Working in home improvement and managing the DFG process in particular take considerable skill and experience. Some areas find that too many people apply for jobs without fully considering or understanding the requirements of a job which involves working on DFGs which causes delays to recruitment and wasted resources.

Solutions

- Work hard to attract graduates, as well as considering apprenticeships. It is possible to grow talent and save on recruitment time and costs. However, a home improvement service needs a core team with the necessary experience (and time) to train up new recruits.
- Promote the benefits of working for local authorities. Some areas are reviewing the communications and messaging they use when advertising a role. They are looking to push the draw of job security and more generous pension arrangements as well as the benefits of working for the local community.
- It is as important to hold on to key team members as it is to bring in new people, so it is vital to include retention in any people strategy. Staff want to see a career plan and opportunities for progression at every stage of their career.
- Developing people internally can provide the opportunity to build a bespoke team to better meet the needs of a specific area and can be supported by bringing in people with a range of different skills.
- Adapt teams so more complex work can be done by those best suited while more general work can be undertaken by staff at a lower grade. For example, it is possible to recruit and train people to do more routine assessments so that OTs are free to focus on more complex cases.

Staffing Structures

Issues

- There is no one-size-fits-all solution and different options apply in different areas. Every local authority is unique.
- Two-tier authorities in particular can have a complicated structure which can impact on how home improvement services are run and staffing structures. For example, one authority in the Network has multiple district authorities where the majority use the same HIA and a small minority have their own in-house service. This leads to inconsistency within areas.
- Some professionals working in home improvement services in local authorities have only certain aspects of staffing and structures they can develop within their control. More understanding from local and regional decision makers on the need for more collaborative working arrangements would be helpful.

Solutions

- Bring fragmented teams together into the same structure (whether that is a local authority directorate or an HIA) to support a more customer- or person-centred working culture.
- Co-locating individual teams such as caseworkers and OTs and enabling time and space for multi-disciplinary teams across housing, health and social care to come together can support integrated working and encourage closer working relationships.
- To make a staffing structure work effectively it is important to shift the mindset of staff who may have been in different teams or directorates. It takes time, commitment and resource to train and coach different ways of working and get people to understand their potential as a new team.
- In areas where local government reorganisation is underway, it may be possible to exploit potential to bring teams together, influence new structures and capitalise staff salaries. It can also provide the opportunity to get local boards to address regrading posts or a pay increase if members make the case that it is the only way to guarantee they can keep hold of staff and pull people into a new team.

Accessing funding

Issues

- Some areas do not have sufficient annual DFG budget to support eligible people in their area who seek assistance in a given budget year and have to manage their allocation through methods such as prioritisation of the most urgent cases and creating waiting lists. And some are working hard to identify other funding sources to complement their DFG allocation – for example, accessing community-based funding pots or making use of the social care authority to fund additional adaptations required in one area.
- Other areas have not been able to use their full DFG allocation for a variety of reasons including lack of staff to support the DFG process and reductions in applications during and after COVID-19. This can leave people in need and lead to a backlog in cases which can be very difficult to clear. Attempting to clear backlogs by using locum or agency staff can also be expensive and local authorities are concerned about over-committing budgets.
- The increase in building costs of between 12-20 per cent makes it very difficult to do work within existing budgets and to keep under the upper limit for individual cases. When an agency fee is taken off a grant payment, it also reduces the amount available for the work.
- These cost increases have intensified the need to turn to other funding in areas where DFG is not sufficient even to support eligible people.
- Discretionary grants are key to allowing areas to provide agile and flexible services. However, there is a fear of promoting them too widely and not being able to cope with potential demand in some areas. This can result in these opportunities not being widely shared within an area.
- DFG allocation algorithms can be out of date in some areas with the result that they do not have enough DFG funding to meet local need. And grant conditions – what can and cannot be done with allocations – can be unclear.

Solutions

- Local areas can use the *Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) delivery: Guidance for Local Authorities in England* to help clarify what elements of service – including staff – can be capitalised under DFG. This in turn, can free up revenue streams for an area to provide additional support.
- Help from Foundations – in particular their regional advisors – can be really valuable. They can support individual local authorities and professionals to make best use of delivering DFGs and using the guidance.
- County councils and district or borough councils can work together to maximise budgets, potentially merging staff and sharing resources in two-tier authorities. For example, one area funds a disability team and management process as well as an OT team at county level which frees up the DFG and BCF allocations at local level.

- One way to clear a backlog in referrals is to run a discrete, time-limited project. One area has made a commitment to use its underspend by the end of this year and has gained the flexibility to increase staff numbers. The future challenge in this area will be to diversify funding streams to maintain staff levels to meet ongoing need in the community.
- Explore whether HIAs coming together could provide more cost-effective models for high-cost adaptations such as bedrooms or bathrooms through economies of scale and potential to engage with contractors.
- Empower and train team members to identify funding routes external to DFG – but only if there is sufficient capacity for the team to do this as well as their other work.

Conclusions – how to achieve change

There is value in local areas sharing what they have done, who they have engaged and how they have worked to bring about changes to the way they work. Here are some suggestions:

- Maintain and create links with mechanisms such as the local integrated care board, the Better Care Fund, the A&E Board to diversify funding sources and support proposals.
- Identify and nurture champions and changemakers in different parts of a local authority to encourage support, initiate important conversations and ensure high level buy-in.
- Champion the reason for doing this work – to ensure that more people in members' local areas can live independently, safely and with dignity in their own homes.
- Show the impact of the work. Numbers can do the talking. Demonstrating the amount of money it is possible to save in areas such as adult social care or health, will make a much stronger case. There may be tools such as the BRE Housing Health Cost Calculator available for support.
- Keep talking. There is value in having conversations between bordering authorities, to facilitate learning between boroughs and explore potential for shared services and specialist staff.
- Take advantage of any learning opportunities. Lessons learned from other areas and services and good practice examples can be fed back not only to members' teams but to decision makers within their areas.

Further resources

- LGA support for workforce planning <https://www.local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-planning>
- RICS apprenticeships <https://www.rics.org/surveyor-careers/contribute/employ-an-apprentice>
- RCOT apprenticeships <https://www.rcot.co.uk/degree-level-apprenticeship-occupational-therapy>

- Skills for Care – Developing your workforce
<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Developing-your-workforce/Developing-your-workforce.aspx>