

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	HOUSING, NEIGHBOURHOODS & LEISURE COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15 NOVEMBER 2017	AGENDA ITEM:	7
TITLE:	HOME IMPROVEMENT SERVICES		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	COUNCILLOR JOHN ENNIS	PORTFOLIO:	HOUSING
SERVICE:	HOUSING	WARDS:	ALL
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Home Improvement Agencies are small, locally based not for profit organisations that help vulnerable residents who are older, disabled or on low incomes to repair, improve, maintain or adapt their homes to meet their specific needs.
- 1.2 Home Improvement Agencies support a number of strategic priorities including preventing hospital admissions, enabling timely discharges from hospital and helping people to remain living independently in their own homes in a safe and secure environment for longer.
- 1.3 Reading Borough Council has supported the provision of Home Improvement Services in Reading since 1996. Aster Living was commissioned to provide a Home Improvement Service in November 2013 for a period of 3 years with an option to extend for a further two years. The contract was for the provision of services to Reading, Wokingham and West Berkshire Councils.
- 1.4 In October 2014 Aster Living were issued with a Default Notice as a result of failing to meet the performance level set out in the contract. The service was closely monitored and improvements were made in service delivery over a 6 month period. However, Aster chose to end the contract early, giving a notice date of 18th June 2016.
- 1.5 In view of Aster's inability to deliver on the contract and the short timescale for procurement of a new contract, the 3 local authorities felt it would be more cost effective and provide a better service to residents for each authority to bring the work in-house.
- 1.6 This report sets out the position for Reading Borough Council since taking the service in-house in June 2016 and details the outcomes for users of the service.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 That Housing, Neighbourhoods and Leisure Committee note the work undertaken to date and the improved outcomes for users of the service further to bringing Home Improvement Services in-house to be delivered directly by the local authority.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Council has supported the provision of a Home Improvement Agency (HIA) since 1996. Having an HIA in place has assisted with the delivery of the Council's Private Sector Renewal Policy and the Housing Adaptations Policy.
- 3.2 These policies provide the framework for the delivery of financial and other assistance to homeowners and Council tenants for disabled adaptations and other home improvements for private sector residents.
- 3.3 Aster were commissioned as the Council's HIA from November 2013 until June 2016 when they ended the contract as they confirmed that they were no longer able to fulfil their obligations as required by the contract.
- 3.4 The services provided by Aster under the contract consisted of:
 - i) Core Agency Service - to deliver
 - a) Services linked to the Council's Private Sector Renewal Policy and Housing Adaptations Policy and involved the delivery of grants and loans to homeowners in the private sector and
 - b) The Council's Housing Adaptations Policy via Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) across tenure.
 - ii) Minor Adaptations - the provision of minor adaptations such as grab rails, handrails, key safes and ramping - across tenure where the cost is no more than £1,000.
 - iii) Handyperson Service - this service was for Reading residents only and delivered low level repairs and maintenance work to ensure independence is maintained. Examples of work include replacing light bulbs, changing tap washers etc.

4. CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 In June 2016 the Council undertook to provide the Core Agency Service and the Minor Adaptations work. The Handy Person Service was commissioned externally.
- 4.2 In July 2016 the posts of Technical Officers, Administrator and Case Officer were recruited to. The work was split across Housing Property Services and the Private Sector Housing Team (Environmental Health). Housing Property Services now carry out major adaptations to properties for Council tenants who require them and minor adaptations across the Council's stock and the private sector. The Private Sector Housing Team delivers the Council's mandatory duty to provide Disabled Facilities Grants along with the provision of discretionary Home Improvement Grants and loans in the private sector.

- 4.3 In addition, a new Housing Occupational Therapist post was created to work across Council Housing and Social Services. The focus of the post has been able to:
- Reduce void turnaround times in Council housing stock by timely assessment of properties for potential tenants with a disability.
 - Consider creative solutions to enable tenants to remain independent in their homes for longer and make best use of the budget.
 - Carry out assessments and recommendations for minor and major adaptations.
 - Identify future needs of disabled tenants.
 - Work closely with Technical Officers and Surveyors to ensure adaptations are carried out effectively to meet the needs of tenants.
- 4.4 Officers across Environmental Health, Council Housing and Social Services also took the opportunity to review systems in place to make processes as efficient as possible for users of the service. As a result the following changes were made:
- Council tenants no longer need to make a Disabled Facilities Grant application as this budget is funded directly by the Housing Service. This enables time to be cut from the process.
 - Put in place customer feedback mechanisms to ensure that adaptations to properties increase independence for customers.
 - 2 part time Occupational Therapists were seconded to the Private Sector Housing Team to speed up assessments for Disabled Facilities Grants and joint visits with the Technical Officer has also meant faster turnaround of adaptations.

5. KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- 5.1 When the Council took over the Home Improvement Agency contract there was a backlog of 83 jobs outstanding. 81 of these jobs have now been completed and the other 2 jobs are currently in progress. In addition, there were 13 Home Improvement Grant cases outstanding, 11 of which have now been completed.
- 5.2 The average time taken to complete major adaptations has fallen significantly since bringing the work in-house from 45 weeks to 27 weeks for private sector adaptations and from 45 weeks to 24 weeks for Council properties.
- 5.3 The in-house service has improved communication and tightened up timescales for minor works. Completing these works at short notice and to a tight timescale is instrumental in ensuring people can be discharged from hospital quickly and safely.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.1 The provision of the Home Improvement Agency work enables the Council to safeguard and protect those that are most vulnerable and provide suitably adapted and improved homes for those most in need
- 6.2 The provision of suitably adapted and improved homes for those in need promotes social inclusion and a safe and healthy environment for all.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 Initial customer feedback via the Occupational Therapist Team confirms that customers are happy with the current service. Further detailed consultation with

Council tenants who have received major adaptations to their home will take place later in the year.

- 7.2 On a monthly basis the Private Sector Housing Team contact all customers in the private sector where Disabled Facilities Grant works have been completed to carry out a customer satisfaction survey. Results from the last quarter show:

Question	Outcome	Comments from customers
How would you rate the process of getting the adaptation done	40% Excellent 40% Good 20% Satisfactory	Communication was good
How would you rate the standard of the work carried out	40% Excellent 40% Good 20% Satisfactory	None
How would you rate the contractors including timekeeping and helpfulness	60% Good 40% Excellent	None
Has the adaptation/s met your needs and improved your quality of life?	100% Yes	I can live independently now It had made such a difference Thank you so very very much, aunts will be thrilled, we honestly can't thank you enough for all your help

- 7.3 The Housing Property Services Team carry out a survey on completion of minor adaptations works. The results following 136 jobs completed are as follows:

Question	Satisfaction Rate
Quality of information received before work started	97.79%
Politeness of staff who booked the appointment for work	100%
Workers politeness and helpfulness	100%
Workers time keeping i.e. - did they come when they said they would	99.26%
Workers providing identification	99.26
Cleanliness/tidiness of the work areas after the work was completed	99.28%
Standard of works carried out	99.16%

- 7.4 Further work is underway to develop and standardise performance monitoring across the new service to reflect revised processes.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 None required.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The total Home Improvement Services budget including staffing costs is £1.5m annually.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

11.1 None.