

Part A

**Report to:** Cabinet  
**Date of meeting:** 7th November 2016  
**Report of:** Head of Community & Customer Services  
**Title:** A county wide Home Improvement Agency (HIA) for Hertfordshire

## 1.0 **Summary**

- 1.1 This report sets out a proposal to establish a county-wide home improvement agency service to help elderly and vulnerable persons to live more independently and safely at home. The service would initially focus on the discharge of the statutory duty placed on District/Borough councils as regards mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), but also provide a platform for the innovative delivery of allied services such as a handyman scheme, measures to tackle fuel poverty, etc.
- 1.2 A business case for such a service has been developed in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), and a number of District/Borough councils, including Watford Borough Council. The business case has been developed after a review of current service provision in the County, consideration of alternative delivery models across the County and the likely future needs of residents in Hertfordshire, particularly the growing elderly population. In order to take forward the proposal, authorities are being asked to confirm their commitment to participate in a shared service so that work can continue on developing the detailed implementation phases with a view to a service going live in 2017/18.

## 2.0 **Recommendations**

- 2.1 That, subject to satisfactory outcomes to 2.2 and 2.3 below, Cabinet approves the proposal that Watford Borough Council becomes a partner in the Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency service.
- 2.2 That Cabinet delegates to the Head of Community & Customer Services, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Property, to contribute to, and agree, the detailed arrangements to establish the service, including any changes required to the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy.
- 2.3 That Cabinet delegates to the Head of Community & Customer Services, in consultation with the Director of Finance and the Portfolio Holder for Resources and Customer Service, to contribute to and agree the detailed financial arrangements to establish and operate the service.

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**Report approved by:** Managing Director

**3.0 Detailed Proposal**

**Background**

- 3.1 The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 requires Local Housing Authorities (LHAs), including Watford Borough Council, to provide financial assistance to people with disabilities who require physical changes to their home to enable them to live independently. Lower tier authorities were assigned this statutory responsibility originally in the 1970s when they were also responsible for home renovation grants, thermal insulation grants and slum clearance.
- 3.2 How that grant is administered has not changed significantly since the Act came into force. Upon a request from a resident, the County Council's occupational therapy service carries out an assessment and makes recommendations about the adaptations that the client requires. The LHA receives the referral, undertakes a means test to determine whether the client is required to make a contribution to the cost and oversees the undertaking of the works.
- 3.3 LHAs receive a capital grant from central Government to support the requirement to give grants. Up to 2008, central Government was obliged to fund 60% of expenditure on disabled facilities grants, with local authorities required to contribute the remainder from their own resources. This 60:40 split ended in April 2008 when the Government withdrew the requirement on local authorities to provide match funding, in order to provide more flexibility to design services relevant to local delivery needs. All district and borough councils in Hertfordshire continue, to varying degrees, to contribute local investment into home adaptations.
- 3.4 Hertfordshire County Council provides minor adaptations (such as grab rails, ramps, etc.) to disabled residents via its in-house service - Hertfordshire Equipment Service (HES). This service is currently provided free of charge.
- 3.5 There are a number of handyman services operating in Hertfordshire, such as the one offered by Watford Borough Council that undertake very minor works, such as repairing dripping taps, relaying carpets, etc. There are charges for these services, but they are typically modest.
- 3.6 In 2013, capital grant contribution from central Government became part of the Better

Care Fund, a pooled funding stream that supports the integration of health and social care services, with the aim of improving services for residents and also to promote the more efficient use of collective State resources. In Hertfordshire, the Better Care Fund is administered by Hertfordshire County Council. The Government has significantly increased funding to LHAs, via the Better Care Fund, to support home adaptations and other services to support independent living. The increase in Hertfordshire is in the region of 80%.

- 3.7 In 2014, the Care Act was enacted, which sought to further change the way care and support is delivered for vulnerable people. The Act sought to radically modernise how care and support is delivered by promoting individual wellbeing, focussing on prevention and wellbeing with the aim that people should be enabled to live in their own homes as long as they are able, retaining their independence and control over their own lives as far as possible. All authorities, including Watford Borough Council, and other agencies have a duty to co-operate, for example by promoting the integration of care and support with health services , in order to improve services to residents.
- 3.8 Beyond the introduction of the Care Act duty to cooperate obligation, there are a number of significant drivers for the fundamental reform of LHA home adaptations services in Hertfordshire.
- 3.9 Vulnerable and elderly residents overwhelming wish to live as independently as possible in their own homes; their support needs are multi-faceted and not necessarily reliant on financial support – many just want guidance on how best they can maintain their independence in the light of their circumstances. Historically, in Hertfordshire, services aimed at this group have been fractured, inconsistent, difficult to access, and financially unsustainable having regard to current public finances. However, significant progress has been made in recent years, such as the rationalisation of over 14 meals on wheels providers to one award winning service (Hertfordshire Community Meals), and the establishment of a countywide not-for-profit assistive technology provider (Hertfordshire Careline). These services have very impressive customer satisfaction levels and, due to their mixed economy design, are financially sustainable. The proposed county wide HIA Service is a continuation of this agenda – providing easily accessible, consistent, sustainable, high quality, and affordable services for all residents in the county.
- 3.10 The current two-tier working arrangements are inherently confusing to residents and introduce inconsistency as well as allocative and productive inefficiency. By integration, the services can become more efficient in two ways: 1) the processing of applications can become more streamlined, involving only one agency, thereby reducing costs and reducing the likelihood of error or inconsistency, and 2) communication regarding the existence of DFGs (and allied services such as housing advice) can be improved - this will expedite the provision of services to those in need and help overcome the current need for them to navigate complex administrative

systems.

- 3.11 Many LHAs find it difficult to provide DFGs services consistently as their scale of operation make them vulnerable to staff absences and dependent on niche skill sets. A combined service would be more resilient to these challenges and would provide an opportunity for career progression, informed staff succession management, skill refinement, and dependable workflow management. This is particularly important in the light of the significant increases in capital investment signalled by the Government and strategic demographic pressures in Hertfordshire.
- 3.12 There is a growing evidence base that confirms the value of DFGs, etc., in reducing the incidence of hospital admissions and, where they have occurred, the sustainability of patient discharge. A county-wide integrated service that provides timely and targeted support to residents so that they can stay safely in their homes is therefore an investment opportunity for the Clinical Commissioning Groups operating in Hertfordshire. The current arrangement of 11 providers with different service standards is less likely to attract such investment.
- 3.13 The role of housing in the promotion of health and wellbeing is well recognised by Watford Borough Council, but has not been so by the Hertfordshire County Council (who are now responsible for the public health function). The collaboration recommended within this report could go some way to rebalance this, illustrating that public health and the wellbeing of Watford residents is a collective ambition of the Council, Hertfordshire County Council and the wider health economy.
- 3.14 Central Government has an expectation of more collaboration and innovation as regards these types of services and therefore this proposed collaboration provides an opportunity to demonstrate this in practice locally.
- 3.15 **Proposal for a Hertfordshire Home Improvement Agency (HIA)**
- 3.16 In response to the changing legislative and financial climate, a partnership review was undertaken between the District and Borough Councils and the County Council. The review looked at the current delivery of services across all authorities, considered examples of alternative delivery models in other parts of the country and the future needs of residents across the County.
- 3.17 The outcome of the review is this proposal for a shared home improvement agency service. The vision for the proposal is to establish a cost effective service that will not only deliver statutory services such as disabled facilities grants, but will also be able to provide a service to those who fall outside of the grant eligibility who currently receive no assistance, The service also aims to promote independent living more generally by offering residents housing related services, such as housing advice, a handy person service, and home improvements.

- 3.18 The objectives of the Shared Home Improvement Agency would be to:
- Ensure that all individuals in Hertfordshire who need housing adaptations to support independent living will have access to an appropriate service that is timely, accessible, equitable and fit for purpose
  - Reduce health inequalities across the county
  - Deliver a fully standardised and streamlined service, enhancing operational efficiency, customer satisfaction and improving value for money
  - Implement robust monitoring arrangements against key performance indicators
  - Improve service resilience through joined up working, adopting a common methodology and service standards, sharing staff knowledge, skills and expertise
  - Support the wider health and social care integration programme across Hertfordshire
- 3.19 The service would include occupational therapists drawn from the County Council's Occupational Therapy Service and technical staff drawn from the District and Borough Councils choosing to join the shared service. Case officers would act as a single point of contact for the client with other professionals such as the occupational therapists and technical staff drawn in as required. This will reduce stress and multiple handoffs, where mistakes and misunderstandings can occur. Having occupational therapists and technical staff in the same team will significantly shorten the process of commissioning adaptation works compared to the current arrangements.
- 3.20 It is intended to undertake a procurement exercise to put in place a contractor framework for common adaptation works e.g. stair lifts and level access showers, as it is believed that cost savings can be achieved from such an approach, as well as opportunities to simplify the commissioning of works.
- 3.21 The Council needs to consider its revenue and capital contributions to this service both in its current form and its proposed future form, see below. Depending on the Option selected revenue / capital costs to the council will vary however all Options will provide an improved and more resilient service for our most vulnerable residents.
- 3.22 It is also believed that the proposed service has the potential to generate income by offering other housing services, for example to people wanting adaptations who do not qualify for a disabled facilities grant, because of the expertise that the service will have in this area. It is intended that the service will contribute to other health and social care integration projects, perhaps by being able to arrange certain adaptations that improve hospital discharges, thus reducing costs in other areas.
- 3.23 The exact arrangements for the new service will depend on the number of authorities

deciding to join the service. It is hoped that at least half of the ten District and Borough Councils and the County Council will be part of the project at the outset. The intention is to launch the service in the financial year 2017/18.

#### 4.0 **Implications**

##### 4.1 **Financial**

4.1.1 The Head of Finance (shared services) comments that the final financial details are still to be agreed and these will be considered once they are developed.

##### 4.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

4.2.1 The Head of Democracy and Governance comments that the intention is that the HIA will be set up as a shared service in the same way as the Shared Internal Audit Service with Hertfordshire County Council acting as the lead authority.

##### 4.3 **Equalities**

4.3.1 Under s149 (1) of the Equality Act 2010 the council must have due regard, in the exercise of its functions, to the need to –

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them.
- foster good relations between persons who share relevant protected characteristics and persons who do not share them.

The proposal to establish the new HIA will have a positive impact on those residents identified as benefiting from the service – namely elderly residents and those with vulnerabilities arising from disability.

The service has identified enabling people to remain in their own homes as an outcome, which would advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (in this case age and disability) and those who do not share them. Additionally, enabling people to remain within their communities supports the need to foster good relations between persons who share relevant characteristic and persons who do not share them within the local community

#### 4.4 Potential Risks

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
Other Hertfordshire District / Borough Councils do not support the new HIA	2	4	8
Government reduces capital grant award for DFGs increasing cost to WBC	2	4	8
Provision of DFG service is no longer a statutory duty for LHAs	1	4	4

#### 4.5 Staffing

- 4.5.1 The current service is delivered by 2 posts, 1 of which is current filled by agency staff and so there are no implications for this post holder with the capital resources for the post transferring to the new HIA. The other post also provides support services to another section in the Council and so consideration will need to be given as to the future of this post holder in line with WBC policies and whether TUPE would apply.

#### 4.6 Accommodation

- 4.6.1 There are no accommodation implications although there may be an opportunity to provide 'touch-down' facilities for staff of the new county wide HIA Service.

#### 4.5 Community Safety

- 4.5.1 An improved HIA should make it safer for vulnerable and elderly people to live more independently and safely at home.

**Appendices:** There are none

**Background Papers:** Herts HIA Business Case

**File Reference:** N/A