

The value of handyperson's schemes for older people

'Handyperson's schemes', first conceived in the late 1980s, provide assistance with small repairs and minor adaptations. A new study, by Nigel Appleton of Contact Consulting, looked at schemes in England and Wales and found that they provide a valuable service with beneficial effects for the health, safety and well-being of older people and other vulnerable groups. However, the current services are, in the main, unable to meet demand and face an uncertain future whilst mainstream funding is difficult to secure.

f Whilst the overwhelming majority of work in all schemes was valued at below £150 per job, some projects indicated that over 80 per cent of their work was valued at less than £50. Often these very minor repairs would cause great distress and inconvenience if left undone. In some instances, rectifying the problem was a key component in enabling the older person to remain in their home.

f The majority of clients are elderly women, living alone and on low incomes.

f Clients' needs spanned a range of services covering small repairs, minor adaptations and home security.

f Those projects delivering minor adaptations were a marked improvement over previous arrangements, both in sensitivity to clients' circumstances and in response times.

f Schemes used either a paid worker, volunteers or contractors; direct employment provided the greatest flexibility.

f The issue of charging clients for the services presented emotional and practical difficulties for most projects. Many were heavily subsidised and self-financing was felt to be unfeasible, given the low incomes of the current client group.

f The researcher concludes that handyperson's schemes provide a valuable service at the intersection of housing and community care. Without them, the small repairs required would generally not be dealt with.

Background

The access of older people on low incomes to the services and resources needed to secure adequate and appropriate housing for themselves has been recognised as a challenge to policy makers and service providers for more than two decades. Home Improvement Agencies have been very successful in responding to some of these problems but have found it difficult to meet the demand from older home-owners for help with very small repair jobs. The positive outcome of the evaluation of three pilot handy-person projects, established by Care & Repair and Anchor Housing Trust in 1989, has encouraged the steady growth of similar schemes. More recently social service departments have provided support but in some cases at the expense of a shift from small repairs to adaptations. This study aimed to give a broad evaluation of schemes' progress and to identify good practice.

The schemes

The study focused upon schemes providing small repairs and minor adaptations, whether by the direct employment of a worker, the deployment of volunteers, or the use of tradesmen and contractors. Although some schemes also provided help with decorating, gardening or home security work, those providing these services without offering either small repairs and minor adaptations were not included.

A total of 63 schemes were identified, 11 in Wales and 52 in England. Thirty-four schemes adopted the boundaries of the local authority as the geographical limit of their activity. The majority (73 per cent) were related in some way to a Home Improvement Agency, usually being developed as an extension to existing HIA activity.

Who were the clients

Schemes differed in the groups for which they supplied services. Most clients were referred to the scheme by statutory or voluntary agencies, although a significant proportion came in response to publicity or recommendation by family and friends.

- 33 per cent of all schemes restricted themselves exclusively to older people.
- 24 per cent served both older people and people with disabilities regardless of age.
- 33 per cent of schemes, in addition to older people, targeted people with disabilities and those on low incomes, both regardless of age.
- 7 per cent served only people with disabilities, regardless of age.

All schemes aimed to provide their service to owner-occupiers but around half provided at least some services to tenants from both public and private sectors. Around a further third assisted a more limited range of tenants in addition to owner-occupiers.

Although comprehensive information about clients was not available from most projects, it is clear from those providing data that the great majority are elderly, female, living on low incomes, and living alone.

The nature of the work

The most common category of service was 'small repairs', a service offered by 88 per cent of projects. Forty-four per cent of projects carried out work related to security although the sophistication of this service varied from fitting and repairing locks to a full home security appraisal, fitting a range of devices and providing advice and support. The most common categories of repair and security work are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Small repairs and security

Doors/windows, repair and adjustment
Guttering repairs
Roofing repairs
Gates/fencing repairs and renewals
General joinery work
Minor plumbing repairs
Minor electrical work *
Fitting locks and security chains
Fitting and servicing smoke alarms

* This is generally restricted to wiring plugs, changing bulbs and similar tasks which do not involve the disturbance of wiring

Figure 2: Minor adaptations

Installing second stair rails
Installing grab rails/hand rails
Installing bath aids/grab bars
Installing toilet rails/frames
Fitting lever taps
Fitting bed raisers
Building half steps
Creating ramps

Thirty per cent of projects carried out minor adaptations, generally by arrangement with the Social Services Department. The most common types of work undertaken are shown in Figure 2.

Only 9 per cent of projects carried out work related to energy efficiency and insulation, most referring such cases to a specialist agency, not least because this was a route to free materials and installation for most clients. Twenty per cent of projects carried out decorating, although this service was more common in those projects which relied wholly or partly upon volunteers. One project provided a gardening service, allied to repairs to garden structures such as sheds and fences. Both decorating and gardening services are offered through a number of projects but not generally as part of a small repairs service.

Taking into account both labour and materials costs, the overwhelming majority of work in all schemes was valued at below £150 with some projects indicating 80 per cent or more of their work valued at less than £50.

Client satisfaction

Seventy-three per cent of projects conducted some check on client satisfaction and all reported a uniformly high level. The study's own postal survey showed high levels of client satisfaction, with both the conduct of the worker and the quality of the work attracting high approval ratings. Whilst most were satisfied with the time taken to complete the work once it began some were unhappy about the time they had to wait before work began.

Clients reported a range of benefits: 31 per cent felt that their home had been made more comfortable, 53 per cent that their home was safer and 40 per cent that it was easier to manage. Others reported feeling more positive about themselves, their home and their general situation as a result of the help they had received.

Ninety-one per cent of clients said that they would have found it difficult to get the work done without help from the project. Sixty-two per cent said that they could not afford commercial levels of charge and 38 per cent said that it would have been difficult to find anyone to do the work. Familiarity with the service and confidence in the worker were obviously important as 32 per cent said that they would have wanted a tradesperson they did not know to be in their home and this might have deterred them from having work done. Community Occupational Therapists reported a marked

improvement in the sensitivity and responsiveness of the service compared with previous arrangements for achieving minor adaptations.

Workload

Most projects felt themselves to be stretched by current levels of demand and a third reported levels above that which the scheme could meet. Only one scheme reported that current demand was under-employing current resources.

Management and staffing

All schemes operated within a wider service and management arrangements reflected that context. Sixty per cent were managed within the structure of the Home Improvement Agency of which they formed a part.

Sixty-nine per cent of schemes employed a worker to provide the service. Fourteen per cent of schemes used volunteers, although a number employed a co-ordinator to work exclusively on this project. Fourteen per cent of all schemes used local tradesmen or contractors rather than directly employing a member of staff. Among those projects who had experience of providing the service through the use of tradesmen and through the direct employment of a worker the unanimous preference was for direct employment on grounds of flexibility, speed of response and lack of bureaucracy.

Clear needs were identified in the course of the study for the strengthening of technical support and supervision and for the development of training opportunities.

Funding and charging

Funding was a major concern for almost all projects. Most had secured initial funding from charitable sources or from Social Services, using Special Transitional Grant - STG (which was brought in to ease the introduction of care in the community policies), but all schemes felt insecure about long-term funding prospects. At least one scheme has closed through loss of funding and others reported having been rescued from the brink of collapse. STG is due to end in March 1997 and there is a real possibility that a number of schemes will close unless secure core funding can be found.

The issue of charging clients for the service provided by the scheme presents both emotional and practical difficulties for most projects. Many projects feel that, targeted as they are to those in the most

disadvantaged circumstances, charging at a level which would produce worthwhile levels of income is simply not practicable. However, 86 per cent of projects indicated that they do currently make some charge with 26 per cent charging at least some clients for both materials and labour. One project charged a subscription to cover organisational overheads and a proportion of service costs and this may have potential for broader application.

About the study

The study, which was carried out in Autumn 1995, involved a postal questionnaire sent to all the schemes which could be identified, followed up by case study visits and interviews in six areas and a postal questionnaire to obtain the views of clients of the schemes.

Further information

Further information can be obtained from Nigel Appleton at Contact Consulting, 10 St Peter's Close, Cassington, Witney, Oxfordshire OX8 1DX, Tel/Fax 01865 880466.

The full report of the study, *Handyperson schemes: Making them work*, is published by York Publishing Services for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (£9.50).

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 123** Adaptations for disability (Sept 94)
- 137** Home-owners' response to a repair and maintenance service (Feb 95)
- 146** Older people's satisfaction with their housing (Jun 95)
- 163** Improving the efficiency of the housing repair and maintenance industry (Nov 95)

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