

SLOUGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Neighbourhoods & Community Services Scrutiny Panel

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WARD(S): All

PART I **FOR COMMENT & CONSIDERATION**

THE HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY

1. **Purpose of Report**

The purpose of the report is to summarise the work of the Slough Home Improvement Agency. The report also highlights some of the challenges faced by this work and the impacts on the community.

2. **Recommendation(s)/Proposed Action**

That the Panel considers and comments on the contents of the report.

3. **The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA, Five Year Plan and Housing Strategy**

The Slough Joint Wellbeing Strategy, the JSNA

- 3.1 Housing is one of the key priorities of Slough's Joint Wellbeing Strategy (SJWS). It contributes to reducing inequalities in health through access to high quality housing. There are clear links between housing and the JSNA priorities around improving health conditions, particularly for older people and children with disabilities.

3.2 **Five Year Plan Outcomes**

This report and the work of the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) touch four of the priority outcomes: -

Outcome 1: Slough children will grow up to be happy, healthy and successful;

Outcome 2: Our people will be healthier and manage their own care needs;

Outcome 3: Slough will be an attractive place where people choose to live, work and stay and

Outcome 4: Our residents will live in good quality homes

The main purpose of this area of work is to enable people with disabilities to remain in their home and only in the most challenging cases to move to an adapted property or one that could be adapted.

3.3 Housing Strategy

Slough's Housing Strategy sets out the council's shared vision and priorities to provide sufficient, good quality, affordable housing including those for people with disabilities. The current Housing Strategy will be refreshed shortly, so these issues will receive more prominence.

4. Other Implications

(a) Financial

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. However, it will consider how the HIA is funded and how this should be considered going forwards.

(b) Risk Management

There are no risk management implications arising from this report.

(c) Human Rights Act and Other Legal Implications

The Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 states that 'a housing authority shall not approve an application for a grant unless they are satisfied that the works are necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of the disabled person' and 'that it is reasonable and practical to carry out the relevant works having regard to the age and condition of the dwelling, qualifying houseboat, qualifying park home or building'.

(d) Equalities Impact Assessment

The Council has a public sector duty under the Equalities Act 2010 to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation in order to promote equality of opportunity to all persons and to those who share a protected characteristic under the legislation. Disability is one of the Protected Characteristics.

An Equalities Impact Assessment is not necessary for this report as it is summarising the current situation of the HIA.

5. Background Information

5.1 What is a Home Improvement Agency?

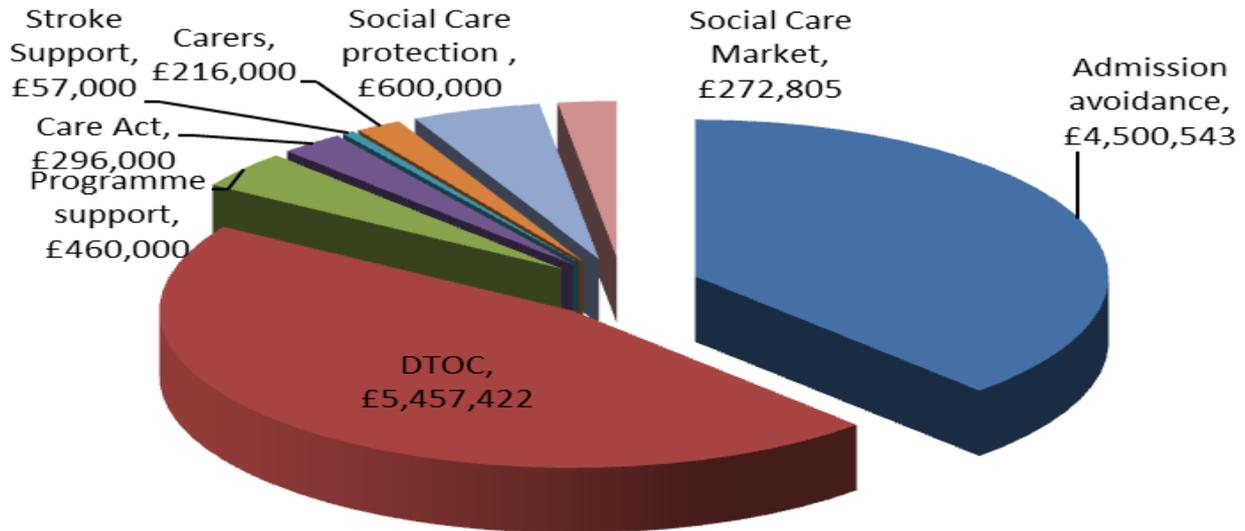
5.1.1 Home Improvement Agencies (HIAs) are local not for profit organisations funded and supported by local and central government. They provide advice, support and assistance to elderly, disabled and vulnerable people who own and live in their own property. They help people to repair, improve, maintain or adapt their home to meet their changing needs. The purpose of the service is to help people to remain independent, in their own homes, warm, safe and secure.

- 5.1.2 To assess someone's needs HIA staff will visit them and offer information, advice and support on: -
- Problems relating to their property
 - All their housing options
 - Completion of any necessary forms
 - Legal entitlements
 - Other available support services
- 5.1.3 HIA staff will give information about financial options and their implications. They will also give practical assistance on raising funds. This will include: -
- Availability of grants from statutory bodies
 - Releasing equity and accessing loans
 - Obtaining independent financial advice
 - Accessing charitable funding
 - Benefit entitlement
 - The effect that certain options may have on benefit entitlement
 - Insurance claims
 - Savings
- 5.1.4 HIA staff will give reliable technical advice, which will include:
- Home visits and inspection
 - Advice on the scale and cost of any necessary works
 - Help with choosing a reputable and reliable builder
 - Monitoring the builder's performance
 - Appropriate contracts and documentation

5.2 Slough's Home Improvement Agency (HIA)

- 5.2.1 Slough's HIA does not offer all of the services described above and therefore offers a number of key services. It offers an assessment and surveying service to owner occupiers for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and an Aids and Adaption's service to Slough Council Tenants. DFGs are resourced through the Better Care Fund and Aids and Adaptions are financed through the Council's Housing Revenue Account.
- 5.2.2 The Better Care Fund is a Government Grant, which has wide application across other work areas. The grant is managed within the Adults and Communities Department and a proportion is available for DFGs each year. Up to £500k is available and is part of the Delayed Transfer of Care (DTC) segment in the chart below.

BETTER CARE FUND DISTRIBUTION



5.2.3 The HIA is therefore a legacy name based on what the team use to do. Due to pressures on resources, the HIA has turned into a basic service and does little outside of the core functions of financial assessments, surveying to create the correct schemes, selection and managing of contractors and carrying out works. It does carry out other functions but many of the services that a true HIA carries out, like a handy person's scheme, it does not carry out. This is essentially due to resources.

5.2.4 Typically, HIAs are not-for-profit but Slough's HIA only derives income through charging a 15% fee on the works they carry out. Therefore, the HIA does not receive a budget at the beginning of the year, like other Council services. The HIA does not carry out enough work to pay for itself and therefore carries a budget pressure. It does not have the staff capacity to carry out this work and if it had, staff costs would increase and more work would have to be carried out to pay for the staff through agency fees – a classic chicken and egg scenario. Last year this budget pressure was £159k.

5.3 What is the Process? – Pre HIA Waiting List

5.3.1 There are different parts of the Council involved in carrying out works so that customers can remain at home. There is usually initial Social Worker involvement, which is referred to an Occupational Therapist, in Adult Social Care. It is the Occupational Therapist's role to decide what is necessary and appropriate and the HIA surveyor to decide what is reasonable and practical. If a property is classed as unfit to receive the adaption, the owner, be it a landlord or owner occupier, will have to make it fit before a grant can be considered. The service user will often state that they do not want a stair-lift, for example, but would like an extension. 'Wants' will not be considered. Officers find that customers do not want a large hole in their living room ceiling and the level of equipment, which renders their home 'unsightly'.

5.3.2 If a customer is willing to build an extension and a level access shower has been referred as the relevant works, providing the customer liaises with the surveyors

regarding drainage, electrics etc. and any building regulations or planning permissions have been met, the HIA will fund and oversee the level access shower installation.

5.3.3 When the Occupational Therapist has assessed the case based on a point's scheme, the case is sent to the HIA. The case is then placed on a waiting list. It should be noted that the case could have already spent some time within this phase of the process.

5.3.4 If the customer is 'end of life' they will be financially assessed within a week of receipt of the case and the whole case will be treated as immediate. If the customer lives in a council property or the disabled person is a child, there is no financial assessment stage.

5.4 What is the Process? – HIA Waiting List

5.4.1 The current waiting List as at 10th May 2019: -

Work Type	No	In Progress
Major Works	92	33
Minor Works	16	16
Council Properties	61	5
Cases not yet on List	30	
Total	199	54

5.4.2 It is taking up to two years to complete a job. An increase in resources in Adults Social Care pushed through many cases, resulting in an even longer waiting time for works to be completed by the HIA. There has been an increase in resources in the HIA recently but timescales have not turned around yet. The HIA will be subject to a review but this will be discussed later in the report.

5.4.3 When a case comes to the top of the waiting list a financial assessment is carried out. If the customer is in receipt of a passport benefit then officers can tell them straight away that they will be entitled to a full grant provided they meet every other criterion. Passport benefits are Universal Credits, Guaranteed Pension Credits, Housing Benefit, Means tested JS and ESA, Income Support and to a certain extent, Tax Credits. However, the application form, Agency Agreement and grant condition forms all have to be completed.

5.4.4 If the customer is not in receipt of a passport benefit, a full financial assessment has to be carried out. Every income, be it benefits, pensions or any kind of incoming funds and all capital other than the house the customer lives in has to be documented with proof. If any fraud is suspected, during the process, it has to be reported to SBC's fraud team or depending on circumstances to the DWP.

5.4.5 Unlike state benefits there is no capital threshold for a grant. Capital of any type is however, taken into account and a notional weekly amount of interest is added to the actual weekly income.

- 5.4.6 On full completion of the financial assessment, a calculation of the amount of the customer's contribution, if any, is made. A computer programme is used for this as it is a far more complicated calculation than any state benefits. If there is no contribution to be paid the customer is informed and the case passed for survey. If there is a contribution to be paid, the customer is informed and a conversation takes place to see if the customer is willing and able to pay the contribution. Once the contribution has been received the case is passed for survey. If the customer doesn't want to pay the contribution the case is closed, the Occupational Therapist informed and the customer's name removed from the waiting list.
- 5.4.7 The surveyor will then visit the property, be it privately or council owned, to draw up a scheme in accordance with the OT's referral. For anything that is straight forward or not an extension, the cost of the works is taken from the schedule of rates list previously submitted by the contractors. In order to keep it fair and transparent the HIA has a list of contractors and the next three on the list are compared and the cheapest one chosen. This ensures best value.
- 5.4.8 Should the required works be an extension or something unusual, the surveyor will need to send out tenders instead of using the schedule of rates. They will send this to three or possibly four contractors. This obviously is a longer process than using the schedule of rates. Both processes ensure the best value for money and a fair choice of contractors. The HIA uses as many local contractors as possible. The time line then depends on the contractor but a start date is usually within six weeks of approval unless there are extenuating circumstances.
- 5.4.9 The Council's Repairs, Maintenance and Investment contractor, Osbornes, carry out the works for Council tenants. These works are not subjected to the standard for Disabled Facilities Grants as the financing is derived through the Housing Revenue Account.
- 5.4.10 The surveyor will oversee the job until completion dealing with any problems, queries or disputes. Once the works have been completed and checked off by the surveyor, the contractor will submit an invoice along with any necessary certificates e.g. electrical certificate. The case will then be closed.
- 5.4.11 Should the cost of the works be more than the maximum grant limit of £30,000 and the customer can show that they genuinely cannot afford to pay, the HIA have to try to find a solution. This may be through a Flexible Home Improvement Loan (FHIL) or charitable funding. The option of a FHIL is only available to those who have reached or are approaching sixty years of age. If all other avenues have been explored to no avail the HIA must make a business case to present to the Director, Adults and Communities, for a discretionary top-up grant. All of these are involved processes, which can cause months of delays.

5.5 What are the Current Challenges?

- 5.5.1 The main challenge facing this area of work is the timescales involved in delivering adaptations to customers. Although the timescales could already be long

when these cases arrive at the HIA, timescales are an issue across the whole process.

- 5.5.2 Because the HIA is not funded through the normal funding avenues of the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Accounts, this is problematic. The HIA, in its current form can never carry out enough work for the team to be truly self-financing. The existing team of two Assessors (this was one until recently) and two and a half surveyors (one being the Team Leader) are insufficient. The log-jam is currently at the HIA assessment stage. No cases can progress unless they receive a financial assessment and as there was only one officer performing this role, this was really problematic. Only recently has these resources been increased. Also, the manager post above the Team Leader role has been vacant for various periods, so there has been a lack of additional capacity at the managerial level for the last two years.
- 5.5.3 It has already been mentioned that there was a budget pressure of £159k at the end of 2018/19.
- 5.5.4 Officers are currently discussing a consultation brief to review the service. The review will look at the whole process and propose changes. These are the key areas, which will be considered by the successful consultant(s): -
- Review the team resources available to determine if adequate and make recommendations;
 - Look at what is required to add on additional services, e.g. handy person scheme, for example;
 - Review processes and procedures and recommend changes if appropriate and
 - Compare the HIA against family comparators to determine effectiveness.
- 5.5.5 This review work is important. The HIA performs a valuable service for the community and enables vulnerable adults and children to remain at home with a degree of dignity. The draft brief for the review work can be seen at Appendix 3.
- 5.5.6 Last year (2018/19) over £700k of work was completed across DFGs and Aids and Adaptions. This constituted 97 cases. As seen from the previous figures in 5.4.1, there remain 199 cases of which 54 are currently being worked on.

6. **Comments of Other Committees**

- 6.1 There are no comments from any other Committees.

7. **Conclusion**

- 7.1 The HIA is an important team in delivering adaptations for people with disabilities. However, the wider team of social workers, occupational therapists, private contractors and Osbornes, the Council's contractor, all work together to make this all possible. Whilst overall works take too long and officers are looking at this issue, the valuable work, at the end of the day, must not be underestimated.
- 7.2 The review work, which will be undertaken will be an important intervention on the road to improving outcomes for those who rely on aids to help them in their day-to-day lives.

8. **Appendices**

Appendix A – Case Study 1: Good News Story

Appendix B - Case Study 2: Sad News Story

Appendix C – Review of the HIA

9. **Background Papers**

There are no background papers