



Evaluation of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability

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Abbreviations

AHB	Approved Housing Body
AOTI	Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland
DEHLG	Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government
DFI	Disability Federation of Ireland
HAG	Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability
HOP	Housing Aid for Older People Scheme
HSE	Health Service Executive
ICSH	Irish Council for Social Housing
IWA	Irish Wheelchair Association
LA	Local Authority
MAG	Mobility Aids Grant Scheme
NDA	National Disability Authority
NRH	National Rehabilitation Hospital
OT	Occupational Therapist

Foreword

The Centre for Housing Research (now merged with the Housing Agency) was requested by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) to undertake this evaluation of the housing adaptation grant schemes for older people and people with a disability to examine the effectiveness of the new schemes and to make recommendations for any necessary improvements.

The evaluation clearly demonstrates that the new schemes play an important role in addressing the housing needs of people with disabilities and facilitating older people to 'age in place'. Improvements to the scheme have also been identified to help increase effectiveness. An over-arching point to come from the evaluation, however, is that considerable resources are used to make our housing stock more accessible. Better design from the onset to make housing more adaptable to the needs of people through the life cycle has clear advantages and it is hoped that this will be an important element in the forthcoming National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability.

I would like to thank all those who were involved in the completion of this evaluation, in particular: those who made written submissions; the local authorities who completed questionnaires, were interviewed and helped to issue the applicant survey; those who completed the applicant survey; all those other stakeholders who were interviewed as part of the research process such as contractors, occupational therapists (OTs) and groups representing the interests of older people and those with a disability; and those who offered advice and commented on draft versions of the report. I would also like to thank my colleague Dr Vanda Clayton who headed up the evaluation and a student intern, Paul Flood, who helped with some data collection and analysis.

David Silke
Housing Agency

PART ONE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Background

The Centre for Housing Research (now part of the Housing Agency) was requested by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (DEHLG) to undertake an evaluation of the three housing adaptation grant schemes for older people and people with a disability; the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme (HOP), the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability (HAG) and the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme (MAG). These schemes replaced three older schemes; the Essential Repairs Grant Scheme, the Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme and the Disabled Persons Grant Scheme. Administered by the local authorities, the terms and conditions for the three new schemes are set out in the *Housing (adaptation grants for older people and people with a disability) Regulations, 2007* (SI No. 670 of 2007). More detailed administrative guidance for local authorities has also been issued by the DEHLG. The three new schemes were introduced in late-2007 and the evaluation focuses on 2008, their first full year of operation.

Terms of Reference

In accordance with the terms of reference, the evaluation focuses on:

- effectiveness of the schemes
- consistency in the administration across local authority areas
- impact of standardised means testing
- systems of prioritisation being operated by local authorities
- impacts of increased recoupment and grant levels
- links with other similar national schemes
- the future role of the schemes

- recommendations for the future operation of the schemes within available resources.

The full terms of reference are listed in Section 1 of the evaluation report.

Methods

Mixed methods were employed to generate the data required to inform the evaluation. Methods included analysis of local authority statistical returns on activity under the schemes, a postal questionnaire survey of local authorities and a postal questionnaire survey of applicants. This primarily quantitative data was supplemented by semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups, which captured the experiences and concerns of a range of stakeholders, including local authorities, representative organisations, Occupational Therapists (OTs) and building contractors. Part Two of the evaluation report provides detailed findings for each of these sources.

Evaluation Findings and Recommendations

A summary of the headline findings from each of the pieces of research undertaken for the evaluation is provided in Box 1 (overleaf).

Box 1 Summary of Research Findings

Research Source	Headline Research Finding
Administrative data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • over 12,000 adaptation grants were paid in 2008, at a cost of almost €95 million • 2,642 grants were paid under the new schemes in 2008, at a cost of €19.5 million • there was considerable variation between local authorities in both the number of grants paid and expenditure levels
Written Submissions (48 received)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • broad support for the grant schemes • lack of adequate funding for the schemes identified as main problem • variation of views on the means-test: some felt it should be more stringent, others felt the means test was too restrictive • the application process was considered too complicated by some
Local authority survey and interviews (27 local authorities responded to questionnaire and 10 local authorities followed up with face to face interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • most local authorities prioritise applicants, 57 per cent of those surveyed were using the DEHLG scheme of prioritisation • average waiting times of 9 – 11.6 weeks were recorded for application to be processed to decision stage – but there was considerable variation in this by local authority area • implementation of DEHLG guidance on maintain a panel of contractors and schedule of costs was low, but two-third of local authorities followed DEHLG guidance on reviewing approved grants which had not been drawn down within 6 months • variation by local authority on grant caps was also noted • the majority of local authorities surveyed (82 per cent) had written appeal procedures and appear to deal with appeals efficiently
Applicant survey (638 survey returns)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • just over half (51 per cent) of applicants found the application process easy or very easy, but 28 per cent experienced difficulties • not enough funding was the main reason given for refusing an application (78 per cent) • successful applicants reported that the adaptations has an important positive impact on them, and high numbers (95 per cent) were happy with the works undertaken • the grants covered all the costs involved in just 18 per cent of cases, shortfall was funded from savings (53 per cent), family or friends (31 per cent) or a loan (18 per cent)
Interviews and focus groups with representative organisations (7 interviews and 2 focus groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grants scheme seen as having positive impact on people's lives, but inadequate funding of scheme seen as main concern • application process can be overly bureaucratic with inadequate support for vulnerable applicants. Lack of flexibility in local authority response also identified as a problem • mixed views on the means test (similar range of views to that received in the written submissions – see above) • problems with system of prioritisation identified • maximum funding limits often seen as inadequate to cover costs, particularly for larger works, and provision for on-going maintenance • applicants can find it difficult to project manage the works to be undertaken • MAG Scheme not seen as sufficiently fast-tracked, as originally intended
Focus group with OTs (3 focus groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grant schemes considered to have positive impact • involvement of OTs in the schemes varied by local authority, the role OTs can play in making sure adaptation matches applicant's requirement was highlighted and the need for inter-agency working stressed • greater clarity on prioritisation under the HAG scheme was called for, as was early involvement of OT
Interviews with contractors (10 telephone interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low levels of awareness of panel of contractors or schedule of standard costs being maintained by local authorities • length of time taken to receive payment / delays in payment raised by contractors as an issue

The overall evaluation findings and recommendations are summarised below, organised under each of the terms of reference.

TOR1. Effectiveness

A consistent finding from the different pieces of research undertaken for this evaluation was that the housing adaptation grant schemes clearly have a positive impact on successful applicants' lives. A typical comment was:

I think it's important to highlight that it's a fabulous scheme. It's a great resource for people with disabilities and it makes a huge difference to their lives. Families are a lot more prepared to come on-board if they get help. It's a huge help to carers as well. (OT, focus group)

The evaluation also found that appropriate, timely repairs and adaptations can enable applicants to: live more comfortably, remain living in their own homes and live more independently.

However, several barriers to the effective operation of the schemes were identified and are now outlined.

Funding of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes: There was a clear consensus among all stakeholder groups that the current level of total funding is inadequate to meet demand under the housing adaptation grant schemes in most local authority areas. This mismatch between funding levels and targeting emerged as the most important barrier to the effectiveness of the schemes in 2008.

Within this context, the three following options are open to the DEHLG:

Recommendation 1:

1. Increase the total funding available.

Or

2. Revise the means test to target limited resources at those who can least afford adaptations.

3. Revise the system of prioritisation to target limited resources at those who are most in need of adaptations.

Given the positive impact of the schemes, any increased funding is likely to be used, but in the current economic environment this cannot be assumed. There is a clear need, however, to address the current situation of people who are eligible for a housing adaptation grant being unable to apply for a grant due to the suspension of the schemes or being refused a grant or placed on a waiting list due to lack of funding. The means test and the system of prioritisation should be revised to better target limited resources, which will provide a better service and greater transparency for applicants (see Recommendations 18 – 24 below). This may also reduce the administrative burden for the local authorities dealing with large volumes of applications that are unlikely to be funded.

Funding Limits: Several representative organisations pointed out that people with a disability are likely to be on low incomes and may find it difficult to meet the 5 per cent shortfall in funding under the HAG Scheme without financial hardship. Representative organisations also highlighted the difficulties faced by applicants with complex needs requiring major adaptations to their homes, such as internal remodelling and extension, which may cost substantially more than the maximum funding limits under the schemes. Indeed, the most expensive adaptations reported by the respondents to the survey of applicants cost €100,000 in total. It was argued that these applicants may find it impossible to undertake the necessary adaptations without grant funding to cover the majority of the cost. The majority of the applicants who responded to the applicants' survey, however, did not report large shortfalls between the grant and the total cost of the works (that said, potential applicants may have been deterred from making an application by the level of grant available).

Within the current economic climate, it is unlikely that it will be possible to dedicate substantial additional funding to the central allocation for the housing adaptation grant schemes, in order to allow increased maximum funding limits. Furthermore, it may reasonably be assumed that construction work is now generally more competitively priced than in previous years. Most of the local authorities interviewed reported that construction costs in their areas have been decreased in recent years. Within this context, it seems reasonable to retain the current maximum funding limits under the housing adaptation grant schemes.

Recommendation 2: The DEHLG should retain the current maximum funding limits under the housing adaptation grant schemes, in order to distribute available funds among as many eligible applicants as possible.

Recommendation 3: In consultation with the local authorities, the DEHLG should review the maximum funding limits annually, having regard to trends in average costs. The funding limits under each scheme should be sufficient to cover the average cost of the main types of adaptation covered by the scheme. For example, the funding limits under the MAG Scheme should be sufficient to cover the average cost of level-access shower or a stairlift, as the two most common adaptations undertaken under this scheme.

Recommendation 4: The DEHLG should consider the introduction of a discretionary payment. This would allow the local authorities greater flexibility to respond to cases of special need or financial hardship, by giving them the option of making an additional payment to cover the 5 per cent shortfall under the HAG Scheme or to exceed the maximum funding limits where the total cost of the adaptation works is very high. In order to avoid discretionary payments becoming the norm and to target any discretionary payments at those in exceptional need, departmental guidance should be issued, setting out the circumstances which might be considered exceptional need. Local authorities should submit the amount and reasons for proposed discretionary payments to the DEHLG for prior approval.

Fast-Tracking the MAG Scheme: Most, but not all, of the ten local authorities interviewed felt that the MAG Scheme in its current format is not operating effectively as a fast-track scheme for minor adaptations. It was argued that applicants must supply the same documentation regardless of the scheme, which is the stage at which many delays occur. This documentation includes evidence of income, quotations from building contractors and OT reports.

Recommendation 5: In order to provide a fast-tracked scheme for relatively minor works, the HAG Scheme and the MAG Scheme should be maintained as two separate schemes. In order to minimise delays, local authorities should implement current Departmental guidance, with regard to accepting one written, itemised quotation from a building contractor under the MAG Scheme, if satisfied that the quotation is reasonable and in line with its schedule of standard costs. If a quotation is deemed unreasonable, applicants should be asked to submit a second quotation.

Developing a More Supportive Service: The majority of applicants did not find the application process difficult. However a sizeable minority did experience problems and

there was a broad consensus among the representative organisations interviewed that many local authorities could be more supportive in responding to applicants' individual needs. It was argued that local authorities generally tend to be quite bureaucratic and focused on procedure. The level of paperwork required can be daunting and administrative errors can cause delays and stress. Furthermore, not all applicants for housing adaptation grants have the ability to negotiate each stage of the application process without special assistance. Assistance may be required with, for example, dealing with written communications. However, it was reported that the local authorities did not seem to have systems in place to respond to applicants' specific needs. This raises the concern that applicants without an alternative source of assistance may be deterred from completing the application process.

Recommendation 6: Local authorities should designate a specific contact person for the schemes, who should respond to enquiries within 24 hours, in order to promote the provision of a more supportive service.

Recommendation 7: Local authorities should consider providing disability awareness training for front-line staff, in order to promote the provision of a more supportive service.

Recommendation 8: Local authorities should assess ways in which assistance could be provided for applicants requiring additional help with various aspects of the application process. Examples include a person with literacy problems, a person with an intellectual disability and a person who is hard of hearing or has difficulty communicating.

Recommendation 9: In order to avoid confusion and provide a more streamlined service, the application forms for the HAG Scheme and the MAG Scheme should be combined. If the local authority advises an applicant that the other scheme would be more suitable, the application should be transferred between schemes in a seamless fashion, rather than treated as a new application. The date of receipt of the original application should continue to apply and the applicant should not be required to re-submit the application form or supporting information.

Panels of Contractors:

Departmental guidance recommends that local authorities advertise for interested contractors to join a panel of contractors, to be made available to applicants. It was

anticipated that this measure would help applicants to get quotes, which had been identified as a problem with the operation of the old housing adaptation grant schemes. However, the problem of securing quotes seemed to have diminished in recent years, with only 13 per cent of the applicants surveyed reporting difficulties.

Implementation was quite limited, with less than half of the local authorities surveyed maintaining a panel of contractors. Most of the local authorities that did maintain a panel of contractors did not make it generally available, only providing the list on request. The local authorities' primary concern in relation to introducing panels of contractors was liability, as it was felt that applicants may think that the local authority was recommending the contractors included on the list or guaranteeing the quality of their work. Another concern was that local authorities may appear to be promoting certain businesses.

Recommendation 10: Departmental guidance should continue to recommend that local authorities maintain panels of contractors.

Recommendation 11: Local authorities should consider the introduction and wider distribution of panels of contractors, to help applicants to secure quotes. Local authorities should ensure that the process for inclusion on panels of contractors is well-advertised and transparent and that panels are regularly up-dated. Local authorities should ensure that the panel of contractors provided to applicants includes a clear explanation that its purpose is to provide information only and that vetting of contractors and obtaining references is the responsibility of the applicant.

Schedules of Standard Costs:

Departmental guidance recommends that local authorities maintain schedules of standard costs, in order to control costs. Implementation was quite limited, with less than half of the local authorities surveyed maintaining a schedule of standard costs. It should be noted that the problem of spiralling construction costs is likely to have diminished and competitiveness increased in recent years, due to the current economic climate. The local authorities' main concern in relation to schedules of standard costs was that there is wide variation in types of adaptation works and house condition, making it very difficult to develop and keep up-to-date a meaningful schedule of standard costs. Some local authorities preferred to rely on the expertise of local authority engineers and clerks of works.

Recommendation 12: Departmental guidance should continue to recommend that local authorities maintain schedules of standard costs.

Recommendation 13: Local authorities should consider the introduction of schedules of standard costs, even for a limited range of the most common adaptations. This would assist with the fast-tracking of applications under the MAG Scheme.

Undertaking Inspections on Completion: The local authority interviews showed that not all local authorities always undertake inspections of completed adaptations prior to payment of the grant, although most do. This is an issue of concern, as the representative organisations identified a lack of support in dealing with building contractors as a problematic issue for many applicants. At least a final inspection gives applicants some leverage with the contractor, if a problem with the work is identified and payment of the grant delayed.

Recommendation 14: In order to promote the inspection of completed works in all cases, the DEHLG should consider introducing a payment for recoupment by local authorities for each inspection of completed works undertaken. This would be similar to payments for inspections of private-rented dwellings.

Recycling of Equipment: Assistive technology is often not used for very many years, as many successful applicants are older people or people with a terminal condition. Several OTs and local authority interviewees reported that housing adaptation grants can buy the same stairlift several times for different applicants, as the companies supplying assistive technologies generally remove and service such equipment for re-sale once it is no longer needed. One local authority interviewee reported that they had recently advertised in the newspaper, offering the removal of unwanted stairlifts, for the purpose of adapting local authority properties. This will be done on a waiting list basis for both supply and demand, in order to avoid warehousing equipment, which is potentially problematic. Supplying equipment on this basis requires ensuring that the household wishing to remove a stairlift is aware that the local authority will not reinstate the staircase to its previous condition and decoration will be required. Consideration was being given to entering into a contract with a company for servicing, guaranteeing and installing the equipment. The benefits and drawbacks of this equipment recycling scheme and its cost-effectiveness remain to be seen.

Recommendation 15: The DEHLG, in association with a local authority, should run a pilot scheme to assess the feasibility of public procurement and recycling of certain types of equipment, e.g. stairlifts. Wicklow County Council is suggested as a potential local authority partner for the pilot scheme, as it has already taken steps towards a recycling scheme for installing stairlifts for its own tenants.

TOR2. Consistency

Central Funding Allocation: Several of the ten local authorities interviewed identified a lack of transparency in the DEHLG's method of allocating central funding for the housing adaptation grant schemes. There was a perception within some local authorities that their allocation did not reflect the level of need within their area and was unfair vis-à-vis the levels of funding allocated to other local authorities with smaller target populations of older people and people with a disability.

Recommendation 16: In order to increase transparency, the DEHLG should review the method of allocating central funding for the housing adaptation grant schemes to the local authorities, with a view to incorporating more information on local needs into the allocation process.

Approaches to Dealing with Inadequate Funding: Practice varied between local authorities regarding the course of action adopted once the funding allocation had been exhausted. Approaches included:

- Suspension of the schemes, not accepting any further applications until the next allocation was announced.
- Continuing to accept and prioritise applications and placing them on a waiting list, paying the highest priority applications first once funding became available. Some local authorities fully process and approve applications in principle pending the availability of funding, while others request up-to-date documentation and re-assess applications when funding becomes available.
- Continuing to accept applications but refusing some eligible but lower priority applicants, on the grounds of lack of funding.

Recommendation 17: The DEHLG should provide more guidance for local authorities on the course of action if demand exceeds funding. This would provide a clearer indication of demand in each local authority area and would also assist in the collection of statistics on activity under the schemes.

The introduction of standardised systems of means testing and prioritisation on a national basis under the new grant schemes represented a move towards addressing the problem of geographical inconsistencies in the implementation of the old schemes. However, some local authorities had opted to adapt the means test to suit their own needs, while implementation of Departmental guidance on the system of prioritisation and OT assessment was patchy, as outlined below.

TOR3. Standardisation of Means Testing

There were mixed views on the introduction of means testing on a national basis, with most local authorities arguing that it represents better targeting of limited resources, while many representative organizations felt that it represented a retrenchment from universal, right-based entitlement. The system of means testing introduced under the new grant schemes was not entirely standardised in practice. Several local authorities felt that the means test was not sufficiently stringent and many felt that it excludes very few potential applicants. Some local authorities had modified the means test to suit their own needs, taking assets into account, for example. This raises concerns regarding the perpetuation of geographical inequalities in access to grant funding.

There was a feeling among most of the local authorities and representative organisations that the means test operates inequitably, in different ways. First, the means test takes into account only the income(s) of the applicant and any spouse or partner, disregarding the income of any other members of the household. Most, but not all, of the local authority interviewees felt that applicants living as part of a larger household tend to be in a better financial position than those living alone, as bills can be shared. It was argued that the means test should take into account the incomes of all members of the household, such as siblings or adult children.

Second, the means test does not take into account any substantial property, savings or other assets in the ownership of the applicant or any spouse or partner. Most, but not all, of the local authority interviewees felt that this is inequitable. Applicants with substantial assets, who could afford to fund the adaptations themselves, are treated exactly the same as applicants with no assets other than the family home, who may not be able to adapt their homes without grant aid.

Third, the means test does not take into account the household's monthly expenditure on mortgage payments or rent, which may vary substantially between applicants. A representative organisation highlighted the financial difficulties faced by parents of children with a disability. It was argued that older applicants are more likely to own their homes outright or to have small mortgages, while applicants with young families, who are at a different stage in their lifecycle, are more likely to have taken out large mortgages in recent years. Thus, even if older applicants are on a lower income, they may have more disposable income than younger applicants with large mortgages and dependents. These applicants may rely on two incomes to pay the mortgage, which can cause difficulties if one parent has to leave work to care for a child with a disability. Any applicant with a large mortgage taken out in recent years who suffers a drop in income due to an acquired disability will face similar difficulties. Households finding it difficult to meet their mortgage repayments are unlikely to be able to borrow further money to undertake adaptations.

Finally, concerns were expressed by a minority of local authorities that means testing can punish honesty, as the local authorities have no independent means of verifying applicants' incomes.

Recommendation 18: The DEHLG should consider revising the means test to take into account:

- the income of all adults living in the household and the higher cost of living for people living alone,
- any substantial property, land, savings or other assets, other than the family home,
- expenditure on mortgage / rent.

Recommendation 19: In order to ensure a nationally consistent approach to means testing, local authorities should ensure that their means testing practices comply with the *Housing (Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability) Regulations* (S.I. 670 of 2007).

Applicants' means are assessed on the basis of evidence of income for the previous year. This can preclude people with an acquired disability and people with a progressive condition from undertaking grant-funded housing adaptations in a timely fashion. A person with an acquired disability, who may no longer be able to work, would have to wait for a year before applying for a grant, in order to be in a position to provide

the requisite evidence of a lower income for the previous year. This may not be feasible if the person needs the adaptations urgently.

Recommendation 20: The DEHLG should consider revising the means test, to extend eligibility for grant-funding within the same year to applicants who have experienced a sudden and substantial reduction in income due to an acquired injury or the sudden onset of a condition. In such cases, satisfactory evidence of the applicant's income at the date of application, rather than their income for the previous year, should be accepted for the purpose of assessing their means.

Similarly, a person with a progressive condition, such as multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease, who can reasonably expect substantially decreased earning potential in future years, will not be eligible for a grant under the current grant schemes until they can provide evidence of a lower income for the previous year. However, borrowing in order to undertake adaptations to meet their long-term needs in a timely fashion may be impossible, as the applicant may find it difficult to repay the loan on a reduced income.

Recommendation 21: The DEHLG should consider ways in which the means test could be revised in order to allow greater flexibility in the relatively small number of cases where the applicant's future income is likely to be substantially less than in previous years, due to a progressive condition. In the cases of these applicants, it will be particularly important to seek medical and OT advice on how best to meet their long-term needs.

TOR4. Prioritisation

Systems of Prioritisation: Practice in relation to systems of prioritisation varied between local authorities. In relation to the HOP Scheme, several local authority interviewees reported that they were prioritising structural and safety issues, such as roof repairs and re-wiring. The replacement of windows and doors appears to have generated excessive demand in many areas. Local authority interviewees argued that, while the scheme should not be seen as a scheme for upgrading wooden or aluminium windows to uPVC throughout, it can sometimes be politically difficult to refuse such applications without more detailed guidance from the DEHLG. However, several local authorities reported that they had taken a decision not to fund windows and doors at all,

to replace only windows which are completely rotten or to replace only windows in the main living rooms rather than throughout.

Recommendation 22: In order to achieve greater value-for-money, the DEHLG should provide more detailed guidance clarifying the types of works covered by the HOP Scheme and how they should be prioritised.

In relation to the HAG and MAG Schemes, some local authorities were using the DEHLG's recommended system of prioritisation for the HAG Scheme, while others had developed their own systems. The OTs who participated in the focus groups largely felt that the DEHLG's recommended scheme of prioritisation for the HAG Scheme was too vague to be useful. Indeed, several local authorities had asked the OT with whom they worked to develop a more detailed system of prioritisation, based on functional assessment, for the HAG Scheme. In particular, the OTs felt that prioritising people with a terminal condition is often a poor use of resources. Due to the timescale of development, successful applicants often come home to noise and disruption and, in many cases, never use the adaptations. It was argued that the Health Service Executive's (HSE) palliative care teams can do a lot with mobile equipment and that this is often a better solution for people with a terminal condition.

Recommendation 23: In consultation with the HSE, the DEHLG should test existing good practice at local level in relation to systems of prioritisation and roll-out a more detailed and consistent system of prioritisation for the HAG and MAG Schemes.

In 2008, the total level of funding was inadequate to meet demand under the housing adaptation grant schemes in most local authority areas, resulting in delays, backlogs and the schemes being suspended in some areas. As a consequence of waiting lists or the schemes being withdrawn, the representative organisations interviewed pointed out that the people most in need of housing adaptations or repairs may be forced to remain in institutional care or to make other living arrangements, as they cannot manage in their home without the works for an extended period. It was argued that some funding should be ring-fenced for cases of extreme need, such as an older person whose heating has broken down in winter or a person with an acquired disability with no access to bathroom facilities.

Recommendation 24: The DEHLG should consider how local authorities might best deal with emergency cases, when funding has been exhausted for that period.

OT Assessment: Practice in relation to referrals for OT assessments varied substantially, with some local authorities referring all applicants for an OT assessment, some referring none and others only referring certain applicants requiring a large suite of works. It was argued that the approach taken by some local authorities, of only referring applicants for an OT assessment if their needs were complex or the proposed works extensive, was a somewhat arbitrary decision. Examples of the types of works which some local authorities felt equipped to progress without an OT assessment included the installation of a stairlift and the provision of a level-access shower. However, several examples were given of grant-funded adaptations which may have seemed straightforward but ended-up being unsafe or unsuitable, as they were not appropriate for the client's needs. There was a consensus among the OTs who participated in the focus groups that the involvement of an OT at an early stage leads to the most efficient use of resources. OTs will go through all of the options regarding equipment with the client, before housing adaptations are even considered. OTs are also familiar with the potential of the latest assistive technologies, which may prove less expensive than, say, an extension.

Recommendation 25: In order to maximise both value-for-money and the positive impact of grant funding on the lives of applicants, local authorities should require an OT assessment for all applications under the HAG and MAG Schemes, if local circumstances permit this approach without causing excessive delays.

Some local authorities rely on OTs employed by the HSE to assess applicants, others rely on OTs in private practice, while the remainder do not seek the input of OTs at all. Some of the reported advantages of using a HSE OT include continuity of care, follow-up visits if required, access to HSE mobile equipment and liaison with other HSE services. However, staffing and resources have a major impact on a community OT department's ability to assist the local authority in assessing applicants for housing adaptation grants. In some local authority areas, the community OT department was not in a position to devote any resources to housing adaptation grants, while in others large backlogs had built up in previous years. Although staffing levels had improved more recently and waiting times for appointments decreased to four to six weeks, this experience was not universal and community OT departments were still under pressure in some areas.

Some of the reported advantages of using an OT in private practice include a fast and responsive service with a high level of awareness of local authority requirements. Drawbacks included a lack of continuity of care, a lack of a link with other supports provided by the HSE and, if paid directly by the client, pressure to recommend the client's preferred solution even if against their professional judgement.

Recommendation 26: Regardless of whether HSE or private OTs are used, local authorities should put in place systems to ensure that OT assessments take place within eight weeks.

Recommendation 27: Departmental guidance should clarify that, regardless of whether HSE or private OTs are used, the local authorities may recoup €200 per assessment from the DEHLG.

Recommendation 28: In cases where an eligible applicant engages and pays a private OT directly, the local authority should allow the applicant to recoup the €200 payment for an OT assessment on submission of the OT report, which may be deducted from the grant paid later. This would be more equitable than the current situation whereby applicants must wait until the completion and inspection of the adaptation works to recoup this payment and, if the application is refused even though the applicant is eligible, they may not be able to recoup this payment at all.

Recommendation 29: The DEHLG should liaise with the HSE, with a view to facilitating the development of closer working relationships between the local authorities and the HSE, ideally through the development of protocols and service level agreements.

Recommendation 30: Ideally, the OT and the local authority inspector should work closely together on individual cases, perhaps undertaking joint home visits. Local authorities should consider ways to promote more effective inter-agency working at local level, such as the adoption of a case-conference approach to prioritisation.

The OTs who participated in the focus groups argued that housing adaptations are specialised field of expertise and that OTs carrying out assessments for the local authorities should have substantial experience in this area. However, OTs do not have the equivalent of a professional institute which accredits qualifications and requires a certain level of experience for full membership. Full membership of the Association of

Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) is open to all qualified OTs. A concern raised was that of newly-qualified OTs setting-up in private practice but with little direct experience of housing. There was also a feeling that applicants who do not have their own OT are often not familiar with the role of the OT and the benefits of involving them at an early stage of planning housing adaptations.

Recommendation 31: In consultation with the HSE, local authorities should provide user-friendly information on the role of the OT in housing adaptations. In areas where applicants engage the OT directly, local authorities should also include some information on how to choose an OT, covering issues such as recognised qualifications, specialised training in housing, relevant experience and professional indemnity.

Recommendation 32: In areas where applicants engage the OT directly, in consultation with the HSE, local authorities should consider advertising for a panel of OTs working in the area to be made available to applicants. Local authorities should ensure that the panel of OTs provided to applicants includes a clear explanation that its purpose is to provide information only and that it is the applicant's responsibility to ensure that they are satisfied with the qualifications and experience of their OT.

TOR5. Recoupment and Grant Levels

Taking into account both the old schemes which are being phased out and the new housing adaptation grant schemes, the number of grants paid and total expenditure peaked in 2008. A total of 12,094 grants were paid in 2008, costing €94,885,091. The local authorities interviewed reported increased interest in the new schemes, when they were introduced in late-2007. Few local authorities had sufficient funding to meet this increased demand. Some local authorities identified central advertising of the schemes, by the DEHLG, as a factor contributing to this increased demand at local level. Most local authorities identified the broader categories of works which may be undertaken under the HOP Scheme, together with more relaxed eligibility requirements, as key factors in generating additional demand for the schemes. Several interviewees remarked that, while there is a finite demand for the HAG and MAG Schemes, there is a potentially infinite demand for the HOP Scheme – for instance window and door replacement.

Increased Recoupment: Under the new housing adaptation grant schemes, local authorities may recoup an increased proportion of 80 per cent of expenditure under the

new grant schemes from their central funding allocation from the DEHLG, while at least 20 per cent must be paid by the local authority. Most of the ten local authorities interviewed reported a marked decrease in internal capital receipts in recent years, which normally funds the local authority 20 per cent contribution, largely due to low demand under the Tenant Purchase Scheme. Although it was reported that this had not proved a barrier to any of these local authorities spending their full central allocation in 2008, some had not been able to devote any additional funding over the 20 per cent, as they had in previous years. Several local authorities expressed concern regarding their ability to continue to provide 20 per cent funding in future years.

Recommendation 33: The DEHLG should continue to require the local authorities to contribute 20 per cent of expenditure under the housing adaptation grant schemes, as this promotes local ownership of the schemes. Revenue raised from inspections of completed works (Recommendation 14) could be used by authorities to this end.

The recoupment system can pose challenges for the local authorities in trying to practice sound financial planning. Grants are not payable to applicants until the approved housing adaptations have been completed and inspected. Therefore, many grants will not be paid in the same year that they are approved, particularly those made later in the year, due to the timeframe of development. This poses a challenge for local authorities in trying to practice sound financial planning, as the DEHLG allocates central funding on an annual basis and it must be recouped within the same year. Some local authorities approved grants for payment the following year, based on an assumption that a similar level of funding would be made available, while others adopted a much more cautious approach.

Recommendation 34: In order to facilitate the local authorities in sound financial planning, the DEHLG should consider the introduction of multi-annual funding programmes for the housing adaptation grant schemes. It should be possible to carry forward funding from one year to the next, where funding has been allocated for works spanning more than one calendar year.

Most of the ten local authorities interviewed reported that the annual central allocation of funding is not usually announced until quite late in the first quarter of the year, which can cause problems because it must still be spent by the following December. This problem was particularly pronounced in 2009, as the announcement was delayed by the second budget in December. The delay in announcing the allocation puts both the

local authorities and successful applicants under pressure. Following the announcement, the local authorities must re-open applications in areas where the schemes had been suspended and process the applications as quickly as possible. In areas where a waiting list is in operation, the local authorities must still contact applicants for up-to-date evidence of income, quotes and so on. In some areas, applicants are required to complete the adaptation works and claim their grant before the end of the year, which can be difficult within, for example, a five or six-month timeframe.

Recommendation 35: In order to facilitate the local authorities in sound financial planning, the DEHLG should announce the central allocation of funding for the housing adaptation grant schemes at the beginning of each year.

TOR6. Synergies and Links

SEAI Grant Schemes: The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) administers three grant programmes for homeowners, two of which overlap with the works available under the HOP Scheme.

- The Home Energy Saving Scheme provides grants to homeowners who invest in energy efficiency improvements, including roof insulation, wall insulation, installation of a high efficiency gas or oil fired boiler and heating control upgrades.
- The Warmer Homes Scheme aims to improve the energy efficiency and comfort conditions of homes occupied by low-income households (privately owned and rented homes), and to establish the systems and growing the capacity in Ireland to install such measures. This approach is founded on a social employment delivery model. This model engages regional community based organisations to acquire and apply the skills to carry out the work – which includes attic insulation, draught proofing, lagging jackets, energy efficient lighting, cavity wall insulation and energy advice (www.seai.ie).

There appeared to be few linkages between SEAI's suite of grants and the local authorities' housing adaptation grants. For instance, few of the local authorities interviewed seemed to forward details of the SEAI schemes to unsuccessful applicants for insulation or heating under the HOP Scheme. Similarly, few reported advising potential applicants to apply for these elements of their application under the SEAI grant scheme, in order to stretch their housing adaptation grant further.

Recommendation 36: Areas of overlap between the housing adaptation grant schemes and the SEAI grant schemes, such as insulation and heating, should be avoided as it represents duplication of effort. Close liaison should be maintained between the local authorities and SEAI in relation to their grant schemes. Each agency should distribute any information leaflets and refer potential applicants to the relevant agency.

HSE ‘Man with a Van’ Schemes: The OTs who participated in the focus groups highlighted the ‘man with a van’ service run by certain hospitals as a fast and effective way of undertaking minor adaptations, such as ramps and grab-rails, to facilitate the discharge of patients. A minority of the local authorities interviewed, which had their own direct labour housing maintenance teams, expressed a preference for undertaking some adaptations, even larger ones, directly. However, many expressed concerns regarding liability if the applicant was unhappy with the works and responsibility for future repairs.

Recommendation 37: The DEHLG, in association with a local authority, should run a pilot scheme to assess the feasibility of running a ‘man with a van’ direct labour service for minor adaptations, such as grab-rails and ramps, working with an OT. Louth County Council is suggested as a potential local authority partner for the pilot scheme, as it has expressed an interest in adopting a direct labour approach.

Care and Repair Schemes: A very cost-effective model for a similar service was provided by one of the representative organisations interviewed, which runs a ‘Care and Repair’ scheme for older people, whereby volunteers undertake minor repairs for older people.

Recommendation 38: The DEHLG should liaise with Age Action, in order to assess the potential for local authorities to get involved with local ‘Care and Repair’ Schemes.

TOR7. Future Role

The housing adaptation grant schemes clearly play an important role in enabling older people and people with a disability to remain living in their own homes, as an alternative to living in sub-standard accommodation or moving to residential care. This clearly has social and fiscal benefits. The key challenge is achieving a balance between the level of

funding available and the targeting of the schemes, while ensuring that those in need of adaptations are facilitated.

Recommendation 39: The DEHLG should prioritise the housing adaptation grants schemes for increased funding where possible. The DEHLG should give priority to two additional issues: reducing variation in the use of the schemes by different local authorities – access to the schemes should be based on need and be irrespective of the geographical location of the applicant; and targeting of the schemes to those most in need.

Box 2 overleaf provides a one-page summary of the evaluation findings and recommendations.

Box 2 Summary of Evaluation Findings and Recommendations

Evaluation Questions	Overall Evaluation Findings	Recommendations
How effective are the new schemes, including impact on applicants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • where applicants are successful, high levels of satisfaction with works undertaken and impact on quality of life • two main problems identified were: lack of funding and long waiting times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • means test and system of prioritisation should be revisited • consider introducing discretionary payment in exceptional cases • fast track mobility grants • LAs should have help available to applicants who need it to complete application • DEHLG should consider introducing a payment to LAs to inspect works completed • pilot recycling of equipment scheme
How consistently are the new schemes administered by local authorities, including targeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inconsistencies found in application process across local authorities: documents required, OT involvement, application of means test system, prioritisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEHLG should review method of financial allocation and provide more guidance for LAs on what to do if demand exceeds funding
What has been the impact of the standardisation of means testing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all local authorities apply the DEHLG means test system, but some have additional tests • many local authorities felt the means test should be more stringent, while representative organisation felt it was a move away from entitlement • lack of independent verification of means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • revise means test to include income of all adults living in the household, substantial property (other than family home), loan or savings, expenditure on mortgage or rent • allow greater flexibility in cases where future earnings are likely to be less than in previous years
What is the nature and extent of the systems of prioritisation being operated by local authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • approximately half of LAs use the DEHLG prioritisation scheme, but many only able to approve P1 grants due to lack of funding • where OTs were involved, prioritisation schemes tended to be more detailed, but OT involvement varied by area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEHLG should provide more detailed guidance regarding prioritisation (in consultation with HSE regarding applicants with a terminal condition) and test good practice • some funding should be ring-fenced to cover emergency cases • OT assessment should be required for HAGS and MAGS, with time limits and with more inter-agency working, and greater clarity regarding the role of the OT
What impacts has increased recoupment and grant levels had on demand at local level, and to identify any other demand issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • some LAs expressed concerns about matching 20 per cent funding in future years • expenditure on the scheme increased in 2008, but still did not meet demand as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • broad nature of HOP scheme • high average grant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LA 20 per cent contribution should remain in place • DEHLG should consider introduction of multi-annual funding programme and a payment to LAs to inspect works completed • DEHLG should announce funding at the beginning of the year
What other national schemes assist with the housing needs of older people and people with a disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEAI scheme can overlap with HOP • some HSE 'man with a van' schemes focusing on hospital discharge • voluntary sector schemes, e.g. Age Action 'care and repair' scheme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • duplication should be avoided and LAs and SEAI should liaise regarding grant schemes • DEHLG and a LAs should pilot a direct labour service for minor repairs and liaise with voluntary bodies operating care and repair services
What is the future role of the schemes as part of a continuum care to meet housing needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear need for adaptations and refurbishment of housing stock • clear benefits for successful applicants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • balance is required between level of funding available, targeting of scheme and ensuring that those in need of adaptations are facilitated
How might the schemes be improved, within available resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the schemes play an important role in facilitating older people and people with a disability to remain living in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the scheme should be prioritise for funding, priority should be given to reducing geographical variation in take up and targeting the schemes to those most in need

PART TWO

EVALUATION FINDINGS

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

The Centre for Housing Research (now part of the Housing Agency) was requested by the DEHLG to undertake an evaluation of the three housing adaptation grant schemes for older people and people with a disability:

- the HOP Scheme, which replaced the Essential Repairs Grant Scheme administered by the local authorities and the Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme administered by the HSE, and aims *To assist older people living in poor conditions to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out;*
- the HAG Scheme, which replaced the Disabled Persons Grant Scheme and aims *To assist in the carrying out of works which are reasonably necessary for the purposes of rendering a house more suitable for the accommodation needs of a person with a disability who is a member of the household;*
- the MAG Scheme, a new scheme which aims to *To fast track grant aid to assist in the carrying out of basic works to address the mobility needs of a member of the household.*

The agreed terms of references for the evaluation were as follows:

1. To determine the effectiveness of the revised schemes in providing a more accessible framework of grant aid, including through an examination of the direct impacts of the new regime on applicants, and the identification of any issues which influence the effectiveness of the schemes in meeting the housing needs of older people and people with a disability;
2. To determine consistency in the administration and operation of the schemes across local authority areas, including the appropriate targeting of the schemes having regard to the particular needs of applicants;

3. To evaluate the impacts of the standardisation of means testing on demand, eligibility, resources, and the flexibility of responses available under the schemes;
4. To examine the nature and extent of the systems of prioritisation being operated by local authorities;
5. To determine the impacts of increased recoupmnt and grant levels on demand for and delivery of the schemes at local level, and to identify any other issues which may have impacted on demand for the revised schemes;
6. To identify synergies and links with other national schemes which assist with the housing needs of older people and people with a disability;
7. To examine the future role of the revised schemes as part of a continuum care to meet the housing needs of older people and people with a disability;
8. To make recommendations for the future operation of the schemes within available resources.

1.2 Methods

The evaluation methods were designed to capture the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders in the housing adaptation grant schemes, including local authorities, applicants, representative organisations, OTs and building contractors. Mixed methods were employed to generate the detailed quantitative and qualitative data required to inform the evaluation, as follows:

- Analysis of the local authority statistical returns to the DEHLG on activity under the housing adaptation grant schemes (see Section 1);
- Public consultation *via* a call for submissions published in the national press and also posted to representative organisations (see Section 2);
- Postal questionnaire survey of all 34 local authorities and semi-structured interviews with a sample of ten local authorities (see Section 3);
- Postal questionnaire survey of applicants from a sample of nine local authority areas (see Section 4);
- Seven semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with nine organisations representing older people or people with a disability (see Section 5);
- Three focus groups with OTs with experience of housing adaptations in three different regions (see Section 6);

- Semi-structured telephone interviews with ten building contractors with experience of undertaking grant-funded works in different parts of the country (see Section 7).

The choice of method for each stakeholder group was determined by the types of data required to inform the evaluation, the anticipated effectiveness of each option for the stakeholder group in question and the feasibility of each option within the scope of the evaluation, as discussed below below.

Call for Submissions

In order to engage with as wide a range of stakeholders as possible, a call for submissions on the housing adaptation grant schemes was published in the national press. An advertisement was published in the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Examiner* on Friday, 6th March 2009. It was also published in the Irish language in *Foinse* on the following Sunday, 8th March. A copy of the advertisement, further information and a consultation form, which could be used to structure submissions if required, were provided on the Centre for Housing Research website (www.chr.ie) and also posted to representative organisations – see Appendix 1.

Submissions were invited from a range of stakeholders, including:

- Older people and people with a disability,
- Carers,
- OTs,
- Organisations working with older people or people with a disability,
- Contractors who have undertaken grant-funded adaptation works,
- Other interested parties.

Comments were invited on the following issues:

- The experiences of applicants for grant aid under the schemes,
- The impact of works funded under the schemes on the quality of life of older people and people with a disability,
- How the operation of the schemes could be improved,
- Other relevant issues.

A total of 48 submissions were received from a range of individuals and organisations with an interest in or experience of the new grant schemes, as listed in Appendix II. Thirty-three of the submissions were made on behalf of organisations. These organisations included 8 housing sections of local authorities, 8 HSE OT departments and 17 other stakeholder organisations, representing and/or providing services for

people with disabilities, older people, carers, the voluntary housing sector and OTs. Fifteen individuals made submissions, 10 of whom have a professional interest in the grant schemes, while the remaining 5 have a personal interest. The individuals who made submissions included 6 OTs, 2 people with disabilities, 2 building contractors, 2 carers, a social worker, a MEP and an interested member of the general public.

Local Authority Survey and Interviews

The local authorities play a key role in the housing adaptation grant process, as they are responsible for part-funding and administering the schemes. Therefore, the local authorities were identified as an important source of both quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative data from all local authorities would provide a geographically complete understanding of local authority policies, practices and activity under the schemes. Qualitative information from a representative sample of local authorities would provide an understanding of the views and experiences of housing practitioners in relation to the schemes and the rationale underpinning their policies and practices.

A postal questionnaire survey was designed, piloted with two local authorities and modified. The survey comprised four sections, covering background information, policies and procedures, activity during 2008 and outlook for 2009 (see Appendix III). The survey was sent to all 34 local authorities on 6th May, 2009, with a deadline of 22nd May, 2009. Reminder phone calls were made to non-respondents, followed by a reminder from the DEHLG on 11th June, 2009. A total of 27 local authorities responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 79 per cent.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken, with either the Director of Service for Housing or the person responsible for managing the housing adaptation grant schemes, in the following ten local authorities:

- Cork County Council
- Dublin City Council
- Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council
- Galway City Council
- Kilkenny County Council
- Louth County Council
- North Tipperary County Council
- Sligo County Council
- Waterford County Council
- Wicklow County Council

The rationale for selecting these local authorities was as follows:

- **Geographical Spread:** Two local authorities were drawn from each of the five Regional Networks of Housing Practitioners, achieving a good geographical spread.
- **Type of area:** Each local authority was classified as city, urban or rural. The city category comprised the five City Councils. The urban category comprised County Councils containing one or more towns with a population of 10,000 or over, plus Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown and South Dublin, due to their suburban character and proximity to Dublin City. Finally the rural category comprised the remainder of the County Councils, containing no towns with a population of 10,000 or over. Two of the five City Councils (which comprise 14.7 per cent of the 34 local authorities), six of the twenty urban County Councils (which comprise 58.8 per cent of the 34 local authorities) and two of the nine rural County Councils (which comprise 26.5 per cent of the 34 local authorities) were included in the sample.
- **Activity under the new grant schemes:** Levels of activity under the new housing adaptation grant schemes in 2008 in each local authority area were categorised, in absolute terms and also relative to the target population. Each local authority was classified as high, medium or low, in terms of the total number of grants paid in 2008. They were also classified as high, medium or low, in terms of the number of grants paid per 1,000 people with a disability and/or aged 65 and over and living in private households. The local authorities which did not award any grants under the new schemes in 2008, *i.e.* Offaly County Council, Galway County Council and Meath County Council, were excluded from the sample, due to their limited experience of operating the schemes. The sample aimed to include at least two of the remaining local authorities in each of the six categories representing levels of activity.
- **New grant schemes suspended:** Any local authorities which were known to have suspended the new grant schemes for six months or more, *i.e.* Offaly County Council, were excluded from the sample, due to limited experience of operating the schemes. The sample aimed to include at least three of the local authorities which were known to have suspended the new schemes for a period of less than six months, *i.e.* Meath County Council, Waterford City Council, Cork City Council, Cork

County Council, Kerry County Council, Limerick City Council, Galway City Council and Sligo County Council.

Please see Appendix IV for the topic guide for local authority interviews.

Applicant Survey

As the target population for the housing adaptation grant schemes, applicants were identified as a key stakeholder group. It was considered important to try to capture the experiences of both successful and unsuccessful applicants for the new housing adaptation grant schemes. Focus groups were not considered appropriate, primarily due to concerns regarding selecting a representative sample, ability to travel and privacy. Interviewing a sufficiently large number of applicants to give a representative sample was beyond the scope of the evaluation. Therefore, it was decided that a postal questionnaire survey would be the best approach. As the questionnaire was quite short and simple, it was decided to circulate it to the Research sub-group of the National Advisory Group for the National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability for comment, rather than undertake a pilot.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section covered general information about the application process and was for all applicants. The second section was for unsuccessful applicants only and covered reasons for refusal and appeals. The third section was for successful applicants only and covered the impact of the adaptations on the applicant's life, the amount of the grant, any shortfall in funding and building contractors.

A separate questionnaire was designed for each of the housing adaptation grant schemes. However, the only difference between the content of the questionnaires was the closed-ended list of options given in Question 3, regarding the types of alterations included in grant applications and approved for funding (see Appendix V).

Due to data protection concerns, it was not appropriate for the Centre for Housing Research to try to directly contact applicants. Therefore, the sample of ten local authorities which participated in interviews were asked to assist in the distribution of the postal questionnaire surveys to applicants in their areas. Nine of these local authorities agreed to participate. In August and September 2009, the postal questionnaire survey was posted to all of the people who applied for one of the new housing adaptation grants during 2008 in these nine local authority areas. There were two exceptions,

where the volume of applications was prohibitive, so a sample of the 200 latest applicants to each scheme was selected.

A total of 638 responses to the applicant survey were received. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below show respondents to the applicant survey broken down by grant scheme and by outcome. Figure 1.1 shows that almost a half (47 per cent) of those who returned questionnaires had applied for the HOP, and 44 per cent had applied for the HAG. Less than one in ten (9 per cent) had applied for the MAG. Figure 1.2 shows a high approval rate – two-thirds of applicants who returned questionnaires had been approved for funding, a little over a quarter (28 per cent) had been refused and small proportions had partial approval or were awaiting a decision.

Figure 1.1 Applicant survey respondents by grant scheme

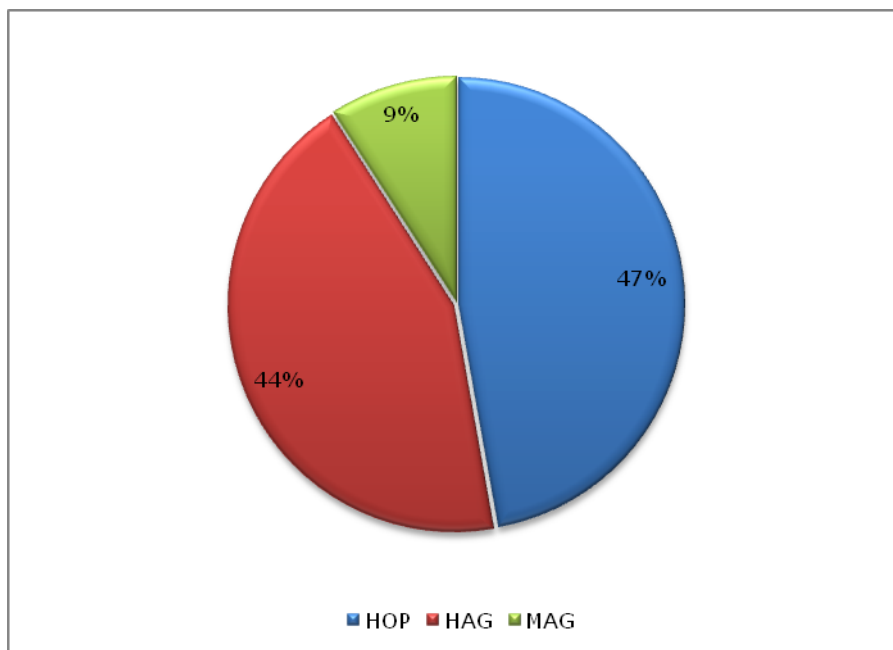
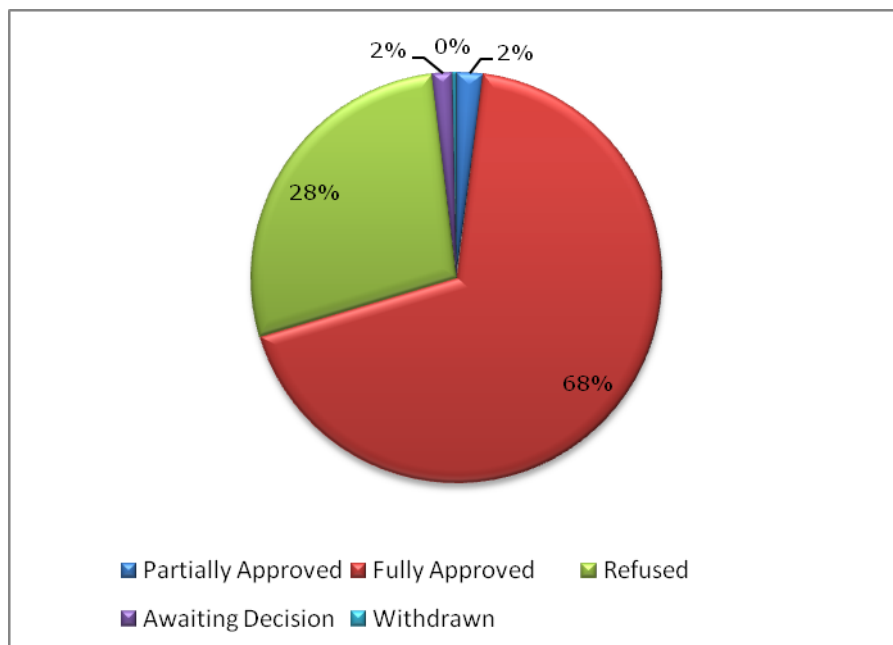


Figure 1.2 Applicant survey respondents by outcome of grant application



Interviews and Focus Groups with Representative Organisations

Organisations representing and/or providing services for older people and people with a disability were considered an excellent source of information on the operation of the housing adaptation grant schemes at a national level over a number of years, through feedback from their membership. Indeed, several of these organisations engage in lobbying for changes to the schemes.

A combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups was selected as the best approach for eliciting the views of representative organisations. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to address issues relating to the schemes in detail, drawing on examples from among their membership. The use of a limited number of focus groups facilitated the participation of a wider range of representative organisations, including several smaller organisations working with people with specific conditions. Focus groups also had the advantage of allowing the identification of areas of consensus and areas of contrasting views.

Seven interviews and two focus groups took place, with the following nine representative organisations:

- Age Action Ireland
- Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI)
- Irish Association of Advocates
- Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH)
- Irish Senior Citizens Parliament
- Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA)
- Jack and Jill Foundation
- National Disability Authority (NDA)
- Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Task Force.

These interviews and focus groups aimed to investigate the operation of the housing adaptation grant schemes, from the applicants' perspective. Topics covered included means testing, the application process, prioritisation, the administration of the schemes by the local authorities, the appeals process, the adequacy of the grant aid available, the register of contractors and any suggestions for improvements (see Appendix VI).

Focus Groups with OTs

OTs are often closely involved in the housing adaptation grant application process so it was considered very important to get their views on how the new schemes were

working in practice, particularly with regard to arrangements for OT assessments and the scheme of prioritisation. Focus groups were selected as the best approach to eliciting the views of OTs, as they would facilitate the participation of a larger number of OTs, thereby covering a larger number of local authority areas. Focus groups also had the advantage of facilitating the identification of areas of consensus and areas of contrasting experience. Three focus groups, each with eight to twelve participants, were undertaken with a sample of OTs. These focus groups were arranged with the assistance of the Housing Advisory Group of the Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland and the HSE, which both circulated invitations to participate to their mailing lists.

Although participation was on the basis of self-selection, the focus groups were considered reasonably representative. Both OTs employed by the HSE and those working in private practice were included in the sample and all had experience of assessing applicants for the new housing adaptation grants. It should be noted that there was some overlap between public and private OTs. Several of the community OTs who participated in the focus group also worked for local authorities on a private basis in their spare time. Participants were drawn from the following areas:

- Dublin City and the Counties of Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, Fingal, South Dublin and Wicklow
- Cork City and County
- Galway City and County.

Participants primarily had experience of the HAG Scheme and, to a lesser extent, the MAG Scheme. OTs tended not to be involved in the application process for the HOP Scheme.

The focus groups aimed to investigate how smoothly the new grant schemes were working, from the perspective of the OTs undertaking functional assessments of applicants for the grants, on behalf of the local authorities. They also aimed to ascertain whether any effective models of inter-agency working had emerged.

Interviews with Contractors

It was considered important for this evaluation to consider contractors. Any issues which adversely affect contractors may have important implications for the effective operation of the new housing adaptation grant schemes for older people and people with a disability, including:

- the ease with which applicants can obtain the number of quotes required by the local authority to support their application
- the likelihood of contractors adopting reasonable pricing structures for grant-funded works
- the ease with which applicants can engage a contractor within a reasonable timeframe to undertake grant-funded works
- the likelihood that contractors will prioritise grant-funded works, if a choice of grant-funded and non-grant-funded jobs is available.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were selected as the most suitable method of eliciting contractors' views, as the list of issues to be discussed was relatively short and straightforward. Ten contractors operating in various parts of the country, each with experience of working under one or more of the new schemes, were interviewed using this method. This sample was selected randomly from *The Access Directory 2009*¹, which provides contact details for businesses and services supplying assistive technologies for people with limited mobility or special needs.

The aim of the interviews was to investigate how smoothly the new grant schemes were operating, from the perspective of the contractors undertaking the works. Topics included respondents' experiences of undertaking works under the new grant schemes, their opinions in relation to the local authorities' panels of contractors and schedules of standard costs, their experiences in relation to payment and, finally, any other issues and suggestions for improvements to the schemes (see Appendix VII).

Experience of undertaking works funded under the new grant schemes varied between the contractors interviewed, ranging from a total of just two jobs to nearly thirty by a contractor based in County Waterford. The contractors interviewed primarily had experience of the two schemes with higher funding limits, with six interviewees having completed jobs funded under the HOP Scheme and six interviewees having completed jobs funded under the HAG Scheme. Just three interviewees had completed jobs funded under the MAG Scheme, while two interviewees did not specify under which of the new grant schemes they had completed jobs.

The detailed findings of each element of the evaluation are outlined in the Sections 2 to 7 of this report, which each address a specific stakeholder group.

¹ Mobility Communications (2009) *The Access Directory 2009*, Mobility Communications (Dublin).

1.3 Background to the new Schemes

The three new housing adaptation grant schemes were introduced in November 2007, gradually taking over the role of three older schemes which were phased out. Administered by the local authorities, the terms and conditions for the three new schemes are set out by the *Housing (adaptation grants for older people and people with a disability) Regulations, 2007* (SI No. 670 of 2007).² More detailed administrative guidance for local authorities and standard application forms for each of the schemes have also been issued by the DEHLG. This evaluation focuses on their implementation in 2008, their first full year of operation.

Several issues relating to the operation of the old Disabled Persons Grant Scheme, which is now phased out, were identified by *A Review of the Operation of the Disabled Persons Grant Scheme and Recommendations for Change* (NDA, 2006). These issues included:

- the geographical distribution of Disabled Persons' Grants was uneven and did not reflect the proportion of people with physical disabilities living in each area
- several local authorities had changed the grant regulations, by introducing means tests and reducing the maximum grant level available, for example. This resulted in geographical inequality in access to grant funding
- both the maximum grant limits specified nationally and the standard costs applied by some local authorities were much lower than the typical costs of larger adaptation
- some applicants were experiencing delays in accessing OT assessments
- very few local authorities provided details of appeals procedures in their guidelines.

The new schemes incorporated several measures designed to address these concerns and to ensure the smoother and more equitable operation of housing adaptation grant schemes for older people and people with a disability. Key changes included the introduction of:

² The *Housing (adaptation grants for older people and people with a disability) Regulations, 2007* (SI No. 670 of 2007) is available to download from: www.irishstatutebook.ie/2007/en/si/0670.html

- a standardised system of prioritisation on the basis of medical need for the HAG Scheme
- higher maximum grant limits and maximum proportions of the works covered: €30,000 covering up to 95 per cent of the cost of works under the HAG Scheme, €10,500 covering up to 100 per cent of the cost of works under the HOP Scheme and €6,000 covering up to 100 per cent of the cost of works under the MAG Scheme
- a decreased minimum local authority contribution of 20 per cent of each grant, with 80 per cent being recouped from the DEHLG
- a standardised system of means testing, on the basis of the income of the applicant and any spouse or partner, with a sliding scale of grant aid
- annual amendment of maximum grant levels in line with the building cost index and annual amendment of income bands for the purpose of means testing in line with wage inflation
- a new payment towards the cost of engaging a private sector OT, where an OT assessment is deemed necessary. Applicants may engage a private sector OT directly and recoup €200 towards the cost as part of their grant. Alternatively, local authorities may retain the services of a private sector OT on a fee per case or contract basis and recoup 80 per cent of the cost from the DEHLG
- a standardised appeals procedure, whereby applicants who are dissatisfied with the local authority's decision may have their case reviewed by a more senior local authority official
- schedules of standard costs for each element of works eligible for funding under the schemes, which is intended to stabilise costs and to ensure greater transparency
- panels of contractors, whereby local authorities may advertise for interested building contractors to be included on a panel of contractors available for carrying out works under the housing adaptation grant schemes, which is intended to assist applicants.

The main features of the three housing adaptation grant schemes are summarised in the tables 1.1 to 1.3 below:

Table 1.1 Summary of the HOP Scheme

Scheme	Replacing	Purpose	Basis for Prioritisation	Qualifying Works	Types of Housing	Maximum Grant Aid Available	% Costs Available	Means Test - Gross Maximum Household Income
<p>Housing Aid for Older People Scheme</p> <p>(Older people are defined as “those aged 60 years and above” but “where in the opinion of the local authority, genuine cases of hardship exist, the authority may consider the payment of a grant to individuals who are less than 60 years of age”)</p>	<p>Essential Repairs Grant Scheme</p> <p>&</p> <p>Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme (HSE)</p>	<p>“To assist older people living in poor conditions to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out”.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The applicant’s medical needs, ▪ The urgency and necessity of the identified works. ▪ GP certificate may be required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Structural repairs or improvements, ▪ Re-wiring, ▪ Drylining, ▪ Repairs to/replacement of windows and doors, ▪ Provision of central heating, water and sanitary services, ▪ Contract cleaning, ▪ Painting, ▪ Radon remediation, ▪ Any other repair or improvement works which are considered reasonably necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Owner occupied housing, ▪ Houses being purchased under the tenant purchase scheme. 	<p>€10,500</p> <p>(sliding scale down to €3,150 depending on household income)</p>	<p>100%</p> <p>(sliding scale down to 30% depending on household income)</p>	<p>up to €30,000 p.a. for eligibility for full grant aid.</p> <p>(€30,001 - €65,000 p.a. for eligibility for grant aid according to a sliding scale. In excess of €65,000 p.a. no grant is payable)</p>

Table 1.2 Summary of the HAG Scheme

Scheme	Replacing	Purpose	Basis for Prioritisation	Qualifying Works	Types of Housing	Max. Grant Aid Available	Max. % Costs Available	Means Test - Gross Household Income
<p>Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability Scheme</p> <p>(Disability is defined as “an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual impairment”)</p>	Disabled Persons Grant Scheme	<p><i>“To assist in the carrying out of works which are reasonably necessary for the purposes of rendering a house more suitable for the accommodation needs of a person with a disability who is a member of the household”.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The applicant's medical needs (3 priority levels defined). ▪ GP certificate required. ▪ Local authority may require assessment by OT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Access ramps, ▪ Stairlifts, ▪ Downstairs toilet facilities, ▪ Accessible showers, ▪ Adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access, ▪ Extensions, ▪ Any other works that are reasonably necessary for the purposes of rendering a house more suitable for the accommodation of a person with a disability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Owner occupied housing, ▪ Houses being purchased under the tenant purchase scheme, ▪ Private rented accommodation, ▪ Accommodation provided under the voluntary housing schemes, ▪ Accommodation occupied by persons living in communal residences. 	<p>For new houses: €14,500</p> <p>(sliding scale down to €4,350 depending on household income)</p> <p>For houses over 12 months old: €30,000</p> <p>(sliding scale down to €9,000 depending on household income)</p>	<p>95%</p> <p>(sliding scale down to 30% depending on household income)</p>	<p>up to €30,000 p.a. for eligibility for full grant aid.</p> <p>(€30,001 - €65,000 p.a. for eligibility for grant aid according to a sliding scale. In excess of €65,000 p.a. no grant is payable)</p>

Table 1.3 Summary of the MAG Scheme

Scheme	Replacing	Purpose	Basis for Prioritisation	Qualifying Works	Types of Housing	Maximum Grant Aid Available	% Costs Available	Means Test - Gross Maximum Household Income
Mobility Aids Grant Scheme	n/a	<i>"To fast track grant aid to assist in the carrying out of basic works to address the mobility needs of a member of the household".</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The applicant's medical needs. ▪ GP certificate required. ▪ Local authority may require assessment by OT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Grab-rails, ▪ Access ramps, ▪ Level access showers, ▪ Stairlifts, ▪ Any other minor works as may be necessary to facilitate the mobility needs of the applicant. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Owner occupied housing, ▪ Houses being purchased under the tenant purchase scheme, ▪ Private rented accommodation, ▪ Accommodation provided under the voluntary housing schemes, ▪ Accommodation occupied by persons living in communal residences. 	€6,000	100%	up to €30,000 p.a. (no sliding scale for households with higher incomes)

1.4 Activity under Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes, 2008

Overall Claims and Expenditure: Overall activity under the housing adaptation grant schemes peaked in 2008, taking into consideration both the old schemes which were being phased out and the three new schemes introduced in November 2007 (as shown in Figures 1.3 and 1.4). The total number of grants paid increased by 26.1 per cent from 9,588 in 2007 to 12,094 in 2008, while total expenditure increased by one-third (33 per cent) from €71,332,435 in 2007 to €94,885,091 in 2008. Although the three revised schemes, which were introduced in November 2007, accounted for less than one-quarter (21.8 per cent) of all grants paid in 2008, it is intended that they will take over the role of the old schemes.

Figure 1.3 Total housing adaptation grants paid, 1997-2008

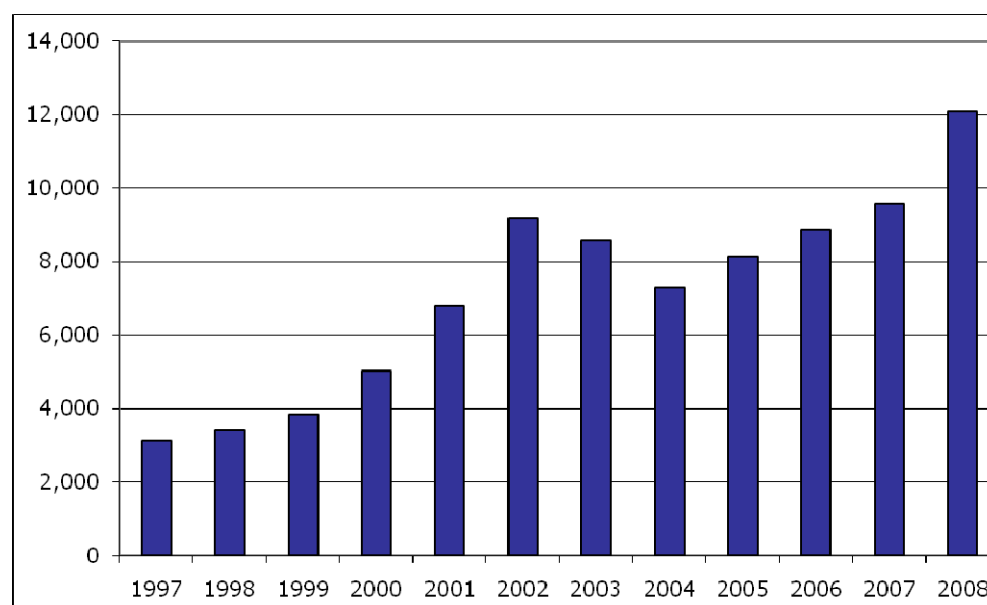
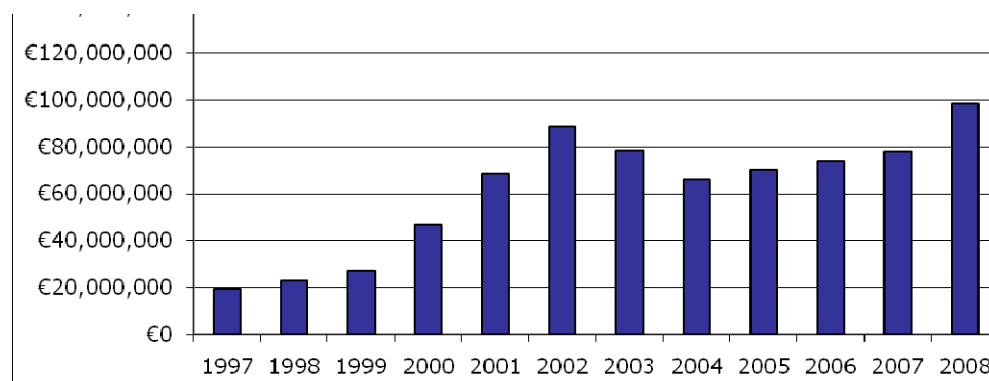


Figure 1.4 Total expenditure on housing adaptation grants, 1997-2008³

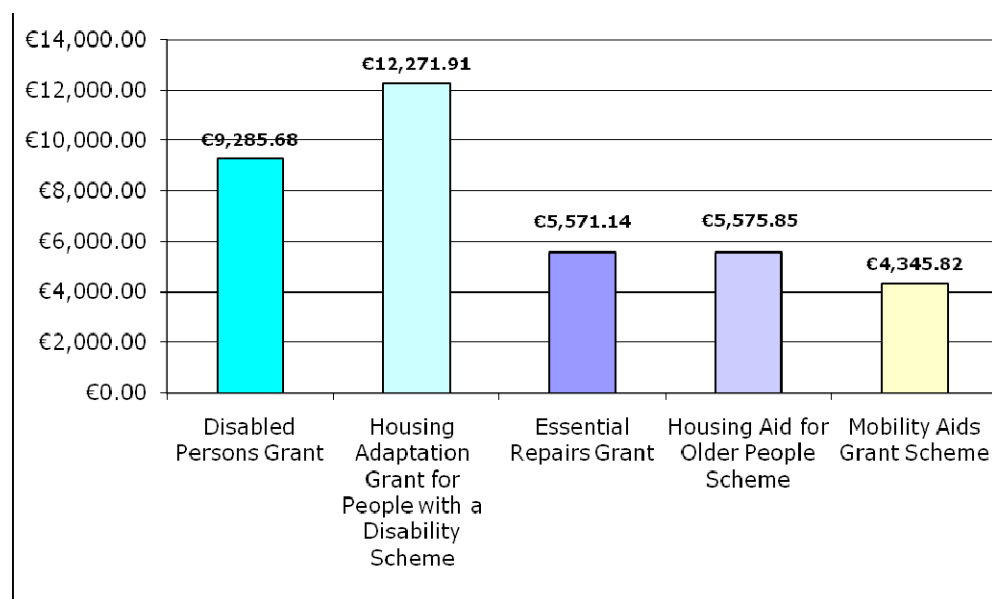


Claims and Expenditure under New Schemes: Activity under the three new housing adaptation grant schemes in 2008, their first full year of operation, totalled 2,642 grants paid, at a cost of €19,497,423.75. The highest level of activity was under the HOP Scheme, with 1,439 grants paid in 2008 (54.5 per cent), followed by the HAG Scheme, with 788 grants paid (29.8 per cent), while the lowest level of activity was under the MAG Scheme, with 415 grants paid (15.7 per cent). However, the highest level of expenditure in 2008 was under the HAG Scheme, which cost €9,670,267.50 (49.6 per cent), reflecting the higher maximum funding limits available under this scheme. This was followed by expenditure under the HOP Scheme, which cost €8,023,641.25 (41.2 per cent) and the MAG Scheme, which cost €1,803,515 (9.3 per cent).

Average Grant Levels: The introduction of the revised housing adaptation grant schemes appears to have had an impact on average grant levels for people with a disability (as shown in Figure 1.5). While the average grant paid under the Disabled Persons Grant Scheme was €9,285.68 in 2008, the average grant paid under the HAG Scheme was about one-third (32.1 per cent) higher at €12,271.91. This can probably be attributed to the increased maximum grant limits under the new scheme, together with the introduction of the MAG Scheme for smaller adaptations. Average grant levels for older people have remained similar under both schemes.

³ Adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index.

Figure 1.5 Average grant levels, 2008



Geographical Variation in Claims and Expenditure: There was considerable variation between local authorities in both the number of grants paid (see Figure 1.6) and expenditure (see Figure 1.7) in 2008 under the new housing adaptation grant schemes. The highest number of grants paid by any local authority in 2008 was 207 under the HOP Scheme, 132 under the HAG Scheme and just 61 under the MAG Scheme. The highest level of total expenditure by any local authority in 2008 was €1,183,013, under the HOP Scheme, €1,305,500, under the HAG Scheme and €226,245 under the MAG Scheme.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, three local authorities did not pay any grants under any of the three new housing adaptation grant schemes in 2008. Five local authorities did not pay any grants under the HOP Scheme, while four local authorities did not pay any grants under either the HAG Scheme or the MAG Scheme.

Figure 1.6 New housing adaptation grants paid by local authority, 2008

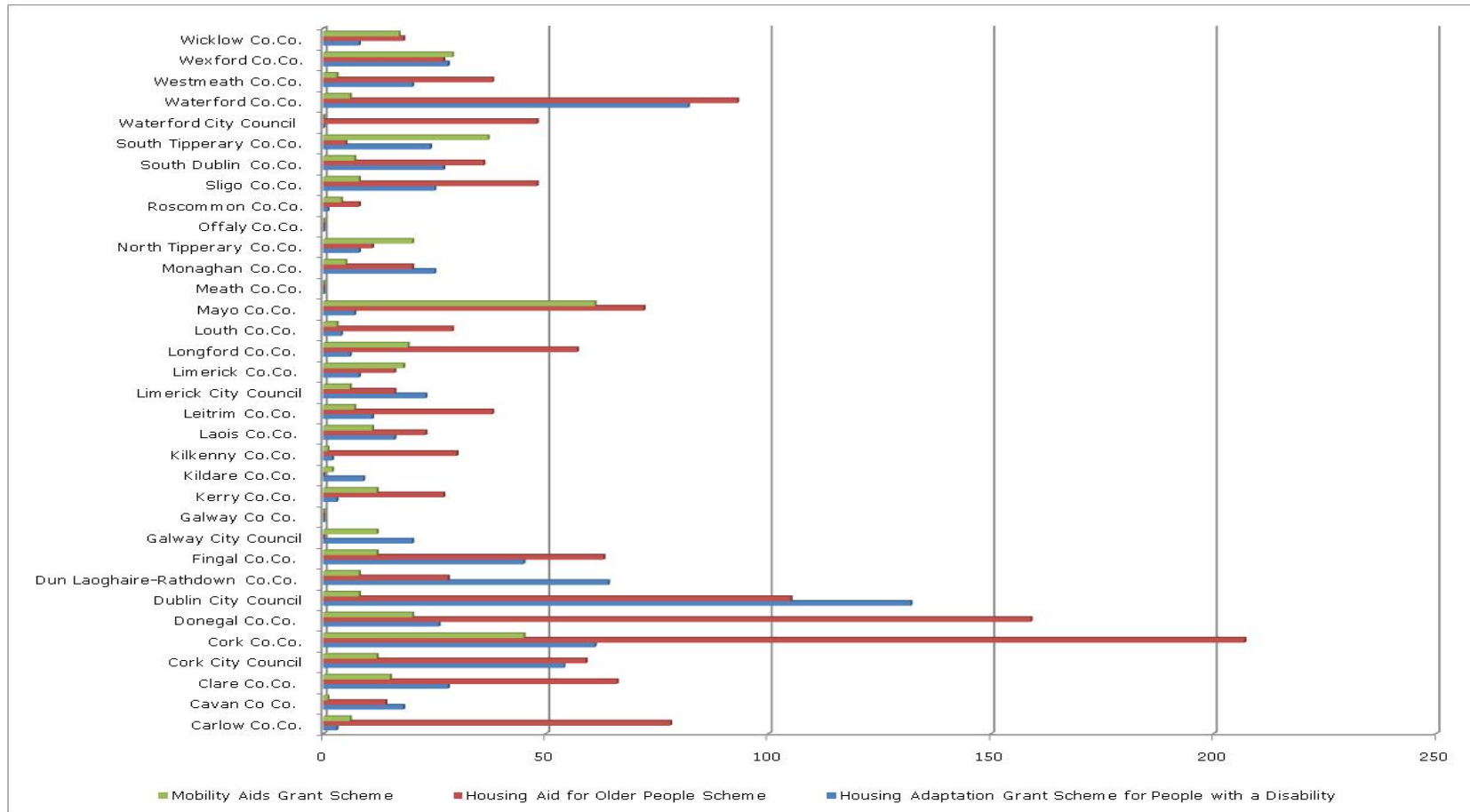


Figure 1.7 Expenditure on new housing adaptation grants by local authority, 2008

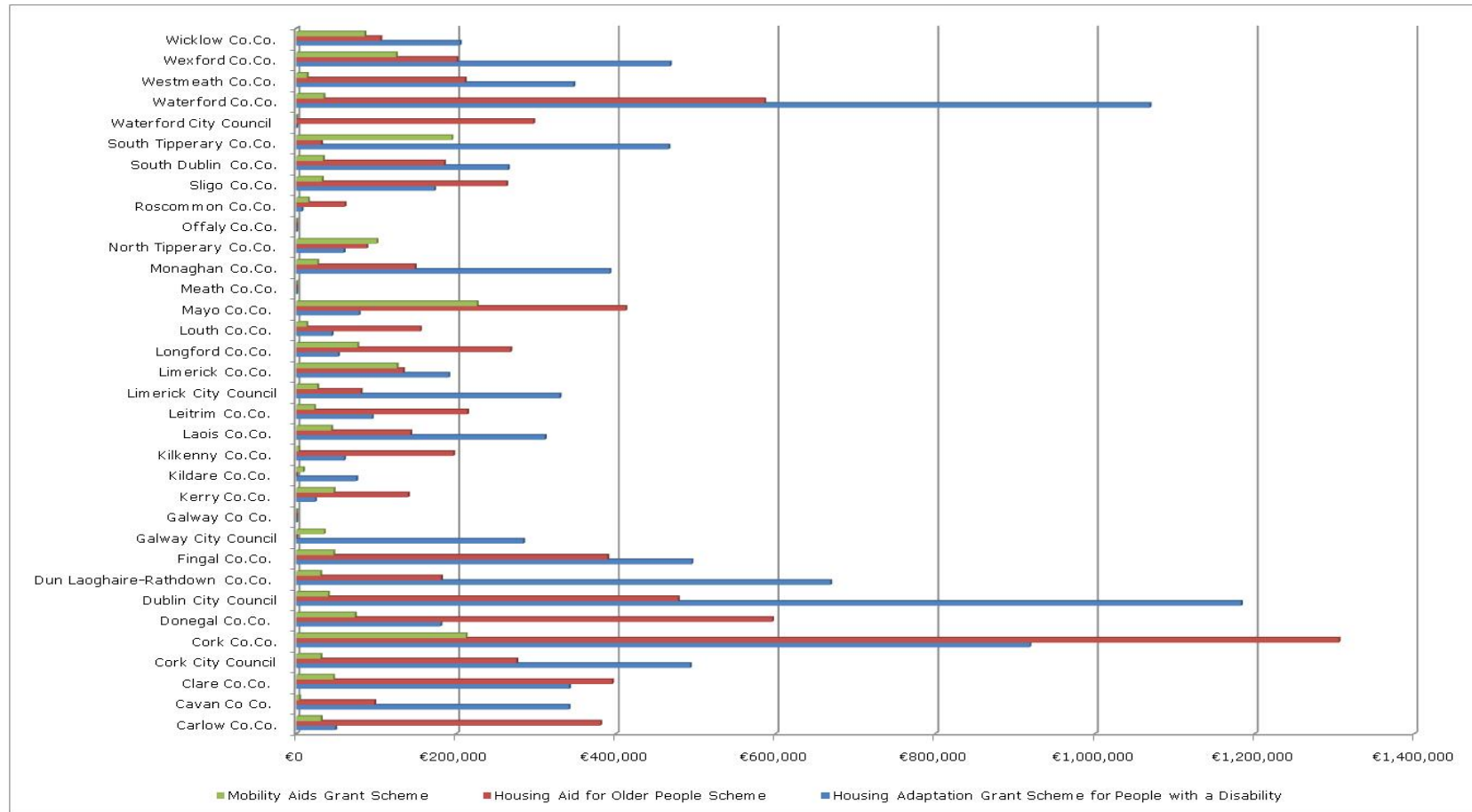
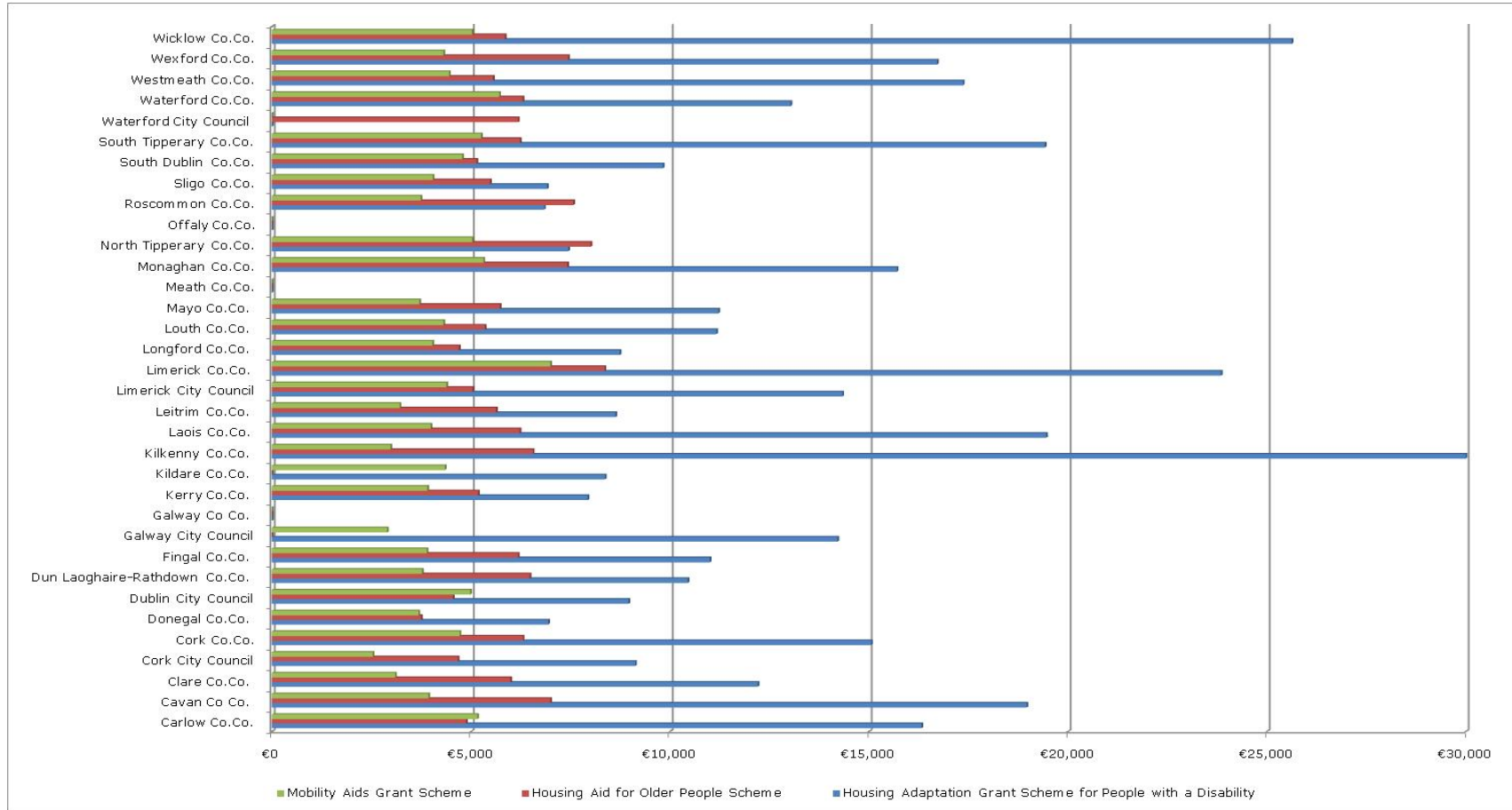


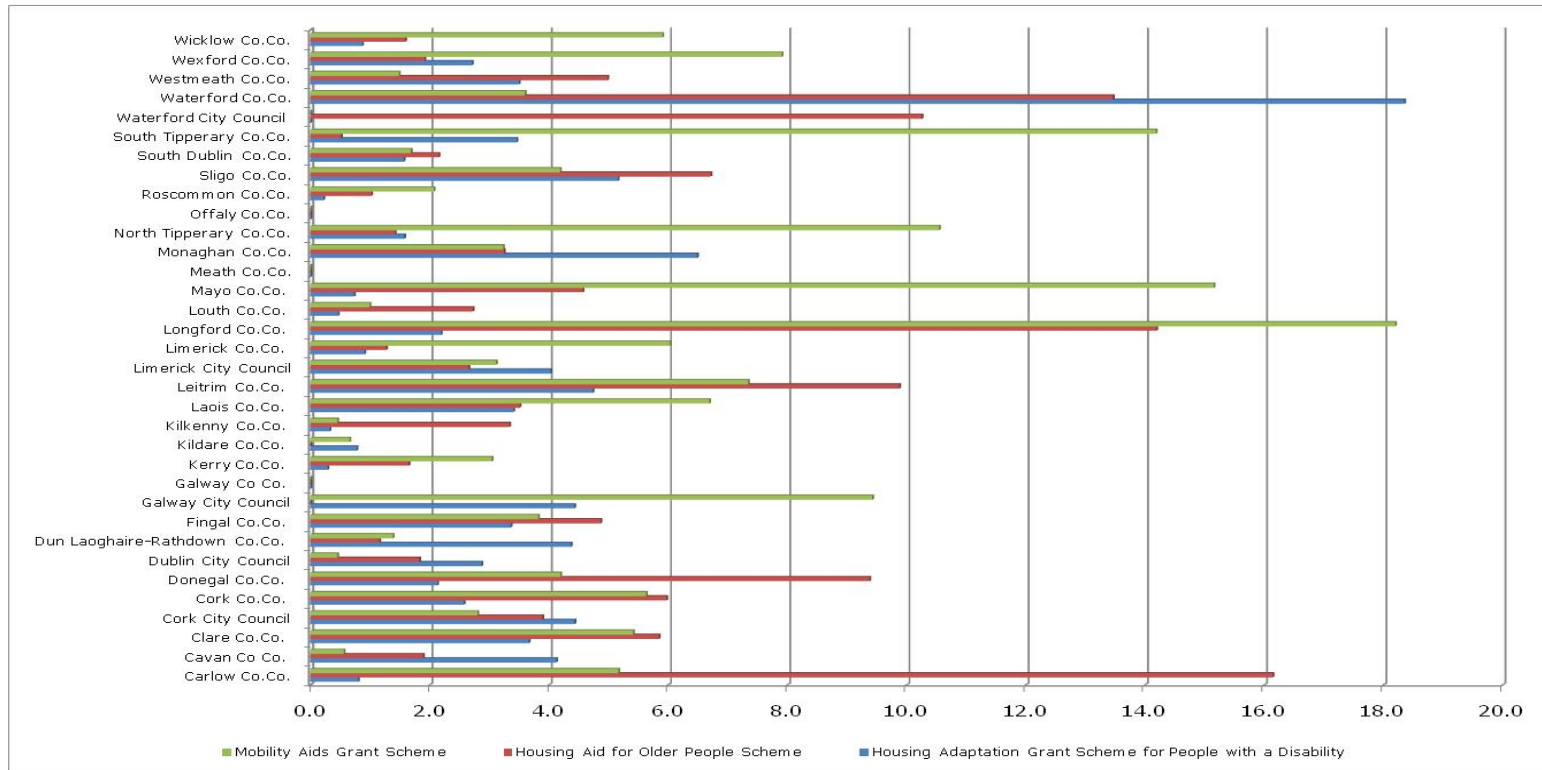
Figure 1.8 Average grant levels under the new housing adaptation grant schemes by local authority, 2008



Average grant levels under each of the new housing adaptation grant schemes also varied considerably between local authorities (as shown in Figure 1.8 above). In 2008, the average payment under the HOP Scheme ranged from €3,750 to €8,363. Under the HAG Scheme, the average payment ranged from €6,843 to €30,000. Finally, the average payment under the MAG Scheme, ranged from €2,538 to €6,998.

There are several possible explanations for the geographical variation in activity under the new housing adaptation grant schemes. First, local variations in demand for the schemes might be due to variations in the numbers of older people or people with a disability living in different local authorities. Figure 1.9, using data for Census 2006, shows a breakdown of the number of grants per 1,000 older person/person with a disability in each local authority. The figure shows considerable variation within local authorities in terms of which schemes are used and also across authorities, indicating that the variation cannot be explained by differences in the demographic profile of each area, or in other words by variations in likely demand.

Figure 1.9 New housing adaptation grants paid per 1000 target population⁴ by local authority, 2008



⁴ The following Census 2006 data best approximated the target populations for each of the new housing adaptation grant schemes:

- Housing Aid for Older People Scheme: older people, aged 65 years and over, in private households;
- Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability: people with a disability in private households;
- Mobility Aids Grant Scheme: Older People, aged 65 years and over, with a disability in private households.

The second possible explanation for the geographical variation in activity under the new housing adaptation grant schemes is that local authorities with lower levels of activity may have opted to focus available funding on the old schemes which are being phased out (the Disabled Persons Grant and the Essential Repairs Grant), in order to clear any waiting lists. There is evidence to support this proposition in some cases. Table 1.4 ranks the local authorities according to the total number of grants paid under the two old housing adaptation grant schemes administered by the local authorities; the Essential Repairs Grant and the Disabled Persons Grant. Of the six local authorities which had not paid any grants in 2008 under the HOP Scheme and/or the HAG Scheme and the MAG Scheme, all had paid at least some grants under the old grant schemes. Indeed, three of these local authorities recorded significant activity under the old schemes. These local authorities may have opted to focus available funding on clearing any waiting lists under the old schemes.

The remaining three local authorities, however, were among the bottom nine authorities which paid the lowest numbers of the old grants in 2008. These local authorities did not pay any grants under the new schemes and among the lowest numbers of grants under the old schemes, suggesting that their low levels of activity under the new schemes were not due to focusing resources on clearing any waiting lists under the new schemes.

Finally, the third possible explanation for the geographical variation in activity under the new housing adaptation grant schemes is that local authorities with lower levels of activity may have had insufficient funding, from their central allocation and/or internal funds, to approve any/all eligible applicants. This issue is discussed further in Section 3.

Table 1.4 Local authorities ranked according to old housing adaptation grants paid, 2008

Local Authority Name	Total Claims	Rank	Percentile / Quartile
Dublin City Council	1,434	1	P ₁₀₀ / Q ₄
Donegal Co.Co.	646	2	
Cork Co.Co.	638	3	
Meath Co.Co.	546	4	
Mayo Co.Co.	511	5	
Galway Co Co.	478	6	
Kerry Co.Co.	464	7	
South Dublin Co.Co.	454	8	
Roscommon Co.Co.	336	9	P ₇₅ / Q ₃
Kildare Co.Co.	312	10	
Carlow Co.Co.	279	11	
Leitrim Co.Co.	254	12	
Louth Co.Co.	247	13	
Laois Co.Co.	214	14	
Cavan Co Co.	210	15	
North Tipperary Co.Co.	207	16	
Limerick Co.Co.	196	17	P ₅₀ / Q ₂
Clare Co.Co.	188	18	
Cork City Council	168	19	
South Tipperary Co.Co.	168	19	
Wexford Co.Co.	162	21	
Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown Co.Co.	155	22	
Westmeath Co.Co.	153	23	
Longford Co.Co.	135	24	
Monaghan Co.Co.	134	25	P ₂₅ / Q ₁
Sligo Co.Co.	122	26	
Offaly Co.Co.	122	26	
Wicklow Co.Co.	121	28	
Galway City Council	99	29	
Fingal Co.Co.	88	30	
Limerick City Council	65	31	
Waterford Co.Co.	64	32	
Kilkenny Co.Co.	56	33	
Waterford City Council	26	34	

2. Summary of Submissions Received

2.1 Public Call for Submissions

In response to a call for submissions published in the national press in March 2009, a total of 48 written submissions were received from a range of individuals and organisations with an interest in or experience of the housing adaptation grant schemes, as listed in Appendix II. The main points raised in the submissions are discussed below, under the headings suggested in the call for submissions of (1) the experiences of applicants for grant aid under the new grant schemes, (2) the impact of works funded under the schemes on the quality of life of older people with a disability, (3) suggestions on how the operation of the grant schemes could be improved and (4) general comments.

2.2. Experiences of Applicants

The issues raised in the submissions regarding peoples' experiences of applying for funding under the new grant schemes are discussed below, ranked in order of frequency of mention.

Delays in local authority decision-making (18): Of the 48 submissions received, 18 mentioned the prolonged period of waiting for a decision from local authorities as a serious problem in the operation of the new grant schemes. In some cases, it was reported that the waiting period exceeded one year. The Citizens Information Board gave an example of a client who applied for a grant in early-2008. She made enquires at the beginning of 2009 and was informed that she was seventieth on the waiting list. Such delays are considered particularly difficult for those whose health conditions or living situations requiring a rapid response. On a related note, the Citizen's Information Board argued that there is a lack of adequate, timely and relevant information regarding cases:

There is evidence that some people have difficulty in getting information from their local authority about the status of their application, when a decision would

be made and when the grant would be paid. Also, the presence or absence of an advocate is seen [as] a significant factor in getting the information sought.

Inadequate / uncertain funding (13): Thirteen submissions expressed concern regarding the inadequacy of the funding of the new grant schemes. According to these submissions, it is not unusual for local authorities to exhaust their allocated funds before all of the applications are processed. Therefore, the schemes are working on a first-come, first-served basis in many areas, which means that high priority applications received later in the year may be refused, due to lack of funding. Cavan OT Services argued that suspending the schemes due to lack of funding, as had happened in Cavan, is a false economy, as they felt housing adaptations were the most cost-effective way of maintaining people in their own homes.

Difficulties in completing application forms (12): Twelve submissions raised the issue of application forms being difficult to complete. It was argued that the application form was overly complicated, only available in English and not accessible for people with a visual impairment, while older people and those with literacy problems can find the information requirements confusing. These difficulties were compounded by a reported lack of local authority staff available to assist in completion of the forms in some areas. One submission, from a building contractor, reported that in his experience some people found the application form so daunting they gave up without submitting an application.

Difficulties in raising 5 per cent shortfall in funding (8): Eight submissions argued that the 5 per cent of the total cost of the grant-funded works, which is payable by the applicant under the HAG Scheme, is not feasible for some applicants. For example, if an applicant needed to build an extension at a cost of €30,000, the applicant would be required to pay €1,500. This amount may not be affordable, particularly within the context that the majority of people with disabilities are on low-incomes, so it was felt that applicants may not be able to proceed with the necessary works.

Inconsistencies between different local authorities' policies (7): Unequal access to grant funding depending on location, as a result of differing policies and funding allocations between local authorities, was reported. Seven submissions mentioned some aspect of this broad topic. The IWA argued that variation in the prioritisation practices of different local authorities leads to inequitable access to the schemes across

the country. An OT argued that there is enormous variation in the administration of the grant schemes between different local authority areas. The National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH) mentioned that it is unclear how many times one is allowed to apply for the HAG Scheme and that the local authorities seem to be operating different policies on this matter. Finally, the AOTI and The Carers Association both argued that funding allocations vary between counties so people in need of grants may be penalised due to their geographical position in the country.

Lack of co-ordination between parties involved (6): It appears from the submissions that the onus is on the applicant to co-ordinate all of the parties involved in the grant application process. Thus, applicants are responsible for obtaining several quotes for the job from contractors, making arrangements with an OT for an assessment if required, submitting a range of supporting documentation to the local authority, liaising with the building contractor regarding the specifications and supervising the building work. Two submissions argued that co-ordinating all of the parties involved, including the relevant local authority, OTs, architects and builders, in addition to undertaking the supervision of the building work, presents a major challenge to applicants. A total of six submissions highlighted the lack of co-ordination between all of the parties involved in the grant schemes and suggested that more collaboration is needed.

Problematic scheme of prioritisation on the basis of medical need (4): The OT Department, HSE North Cork expressed concerns regarding the current scheme of prioritisation on the basis of medical need, under the HAG Scheme. It was argued that, as clients are often not seen in their own homes by their GPs, this can often lead to desirable rather than essential recommendations. The inclusion and prioritisation of terminally ill people in the grant system was also identified as problematic, as it was argued that the timeframe of construction work means that the applicant rarely benefits from the adaptations, thereby wasting money. Waterford County Council echoed this concern as did the NRH which stated:

Anecdotal evidence suggests that grant aid is approved for terminal ill patients whose prognosis is such that they will be deceased prior to the completion of works. In addition to the cost of inefficiencies that arise from the situation, there is unnecessary disruption for the patient and their family.

South Dublin County Council reported that many applicants have queried the logic of medical prioritisation for works under the HOP Scheme, which do not relate to an illness or disability.

Difficulties in obtaining quotes (3): Three submissions reported that applicants can find it very difficult to obtain multiple quotes for the proposed work from building contractors. Older people were highlighted as a group that may experience difficulties in this regard, if they did not have the assistance of a family member. The Citizens' Information Board gave an example of an older person who required a certain job to be done, which only one company in the area was capable of doing. Obtaining two quotes in this situation proved impossible.

Failure of means test to take into account sudden injury (3): Three submissions argued that some people who they felt should be eligible for a grant were excluded because the method of means testing fails to take into account the financial impact of sudden debilitating injury. The means test is based on the applicant's income for the previous year and does not take into account present or likely future earnings. It was argued that applicants are deemed ineligible on the basis of the means test, even if their earning power has been severely diminished following a sudden injury.

Inadequacy of maximum funding levels for certain works (3): Three submissions argued that the costs of undertaking certain works, such as building an extension or refurbishing a house which may include re-roofing, re-wiring and damp-proofing, often exceed the maximum funding level available under the grant schemes. Waterford County Council mentioned that the maximum grant of €10,500 available under the HOP Scheme is often inadequate to pay for the full range of works required to bring many old houses up to a reasonable standard. Clúid Housing Association mentioned that adaptations required for serious disabilities can easily exceed the maximum grant of €30,000 available under the HAG Scheme.

Lack of clarity regarding the role of OTs (3): Many of the submissions received came from OTs and organisations employing or representing OTs. Three of these submissions argued that there is a lack of clarity regarding the role of OTs in relation to the grant schemes. The Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) reported that local authorities do not always request OT assessment reports and, when

reports are requested, the requirements vary between local authorities. In some cases, there is no contact between local authority staff and the OT and the completed works are not always inspected by the local authorities to ensure that the OT's specifications are met. OT's highlighted that the use of the word 'may' in Section 1 of the guidance is open to interpretation and it is unclear who decides whether or not an OT is needed.

Funding does not cover work to be done (3): The HSE, Dublin Mid-Leinster viewed the introduction of the MAG Scheme as a beneficial development. However, it was argued that the maximum level of funding available under the scheme should be increased, in order to cover level-access showers. Clúid Housing Association agreed that the MAG Scheme can work well but only in situations where long-term needs can be met by undertaking relatively small works. Another submission reported that applicants often come back to OTs after they price the work to be done to see if the rooms could be made smaller to reduce the cost involved.

Lack of provision for the needs of people with specific disabilities (3): DeafHear.ie argued that the grant schemes do not appear to be designed to meet the needs of people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. They felt assistive technology, such as adapted smoke alarms and door flashes, would address health and safety issues for those living in private-rented or owner-occupied housing and should be available under the schemes. Another submission reported that the application form is not accessible for those with a visual impairment, making it difficult for this group to apply without assistance. Finally, a further submission argued that the grant schemes did not take the needs of people with mental health disabilities sufficiently into account.

Fear of disclosure of financial information (2): The amount of private financial information required during the means testing process can confuse and intimidate applicants and put them off applying, according to the AOTI and the OT manager at Vergemount Hall. Some clients are wary of supplying such income details, for fear of interfering with medical card entitlements.

Lack of clarity regarding the distinction between the two housing adaptation grant schemes for people with a disability (2): The AOTI argued that local authority staff often have a poor understanding of the difference between the criteria for the HAG Scheme and the MAG Scheme. Applicants are sometimes unclear regarding which

scheme would be most suitable for their situation and this information is not always provided.

Penalises children with a disability (2): Two submissions argued that, since the total household income is taken into account when means testing, the combined income of the parents of a child or children with a disability may disqualify them from receiving a grant.

Lack of a specific contact person within each local authority (2): The OT Department of Sacred Heart Hospital, Castlebar reported that there is no named contact person or 'face' with whom people with a disability could communicate regarding the grants. This point was echoed in another submission based on an applicant's personal experience.

Failure to take into account the importance of aesthetics or retaining existing use of space (1): The OT Department of the Waterford Community Services reported that some of their clients felt that the grant schemes failed to take into account aesthetics or the retention of existing rooms for the purposes of family living.

Lack of provision for carers (1): The NRH pointed out that the HAG Scheme does not cover the addition of a bedroom to accommodate a carer, even in situations where the presence of a carer has the potential to maintain the individual in their own home.

Lack of provision for architects' fees (1): One submission reported that the grant schemes do not make provision for the cost of hiring an architect, where necessary, for applications for extensions and so on.

Potential discrimination against non-homeowners (1): One submission made the case that the schemes can have a discriminatory outcome against people living in private rented accommodation, as the duration of the tenancy could affect the likelihood of grant approval. Due to the economic downturn and fluctuation in rents, it can be difficult for tenants to secure long term-leases, it was suggested.

2.3 Impact on Quality of Life

Twenty-four submissions concurred that the new grant schemes can have a very positive impact on the quality of life of older people and people with a disability. For instance, the AOTI's submission stated that:

Housing adaptations enable older people and people with disabilities to remain living in their own home by making the home safe and accessible, often preventing hospital admission and facilitating hospital discharge. This keeps the person in their own community in familiar surroundings with ongoing support of friends, family, neighbours and local community services. The person's level of independence can be maximized and, if care is required, adaptations make care more manageable.

The Rehab Group wrote:

The Adaptation Grant Schemes provide a number of key benefits to people with disabilities and older people – by enabling people to adapt their homes to their needs they can maintain their support network, remain in their own community and, as far as possible, continue their life as they wish. Adaptation of a person's current home also offers considerable benefit to the state as it is often a much lower-cost solution to providing for their care needs in a nursing home or hospital setting.

A submission recounting the impact a grant to replace windows had on her mother's quality of life wrote:

The greater security she felt having secure windows lessened her fears and anxieties. The works funded greatly enhanced our mother's quality of life.

2.4 Suggestions for Improvements

Suggestions made in the submissions regarding how the operation of the new grant schemes could be improved are outlined below, ranked in order of frequency of mention.

Revise means test (8): Eight submissions suggested revision of the means test, although they were not in agreement as to how this should be done. Some expressed the view that the income limits were set too high, leading to the schemes being over-subscribed. It was suggested that the means test should take into account applicants' savings and other assets, such as second houses, in addition to the income of other adult members of the household. For example, one local authority submission noted:

While it may seem unfair to include adult children's income as household income, it also seems unfair to treat applicants the same whether they are living alone with no children or are living with children who are high income earners.

Two submissions suggested that any payments received by applicants under an insurance claim related to the disability should be taken into account as income, as part of the means test. It was argued that such awards are generally made with a view to providing home improvements for changed mobility needs along with an income stream for the future.

In contrast, three other submissions held the view that the means test excludes households on relatively modest incomes, leading either to their impoverishment or their continuing to live in sub-standard conditions because the adaptation is unaffordable. Some submissions advocated greater discretion in applying the means test criteria. This would give the local authorities greater flexibility to cater for people whose earning power has diminished since the previous year, on which the means test is based. Examples include people with an acquired injury, people with a progressive condition, parents leaving work to care for a child with a disability and people who are due to retire.

Review prioritisation scheme (8): Eight submissions suggested revision of the prioritisation scheme. The IWA argued that prioritising applications has resulted in unequal access to adaptation grants in different local authority areas and also difficulty in understanding the basis and rationale of the systems of prioritisation, how decisions are made and by whom. An issue was raised regarding the extent to which the rating of an application depended on the quality of the supporting documentation submitted. The IWA recommended a review of the operation of prioritisation schemes to establish transparency and equity, with a commitment to abolish the priority schemes over a five-year period.

In contrast, Kilkenny County Council suggested that local authorities formulate their own policy document in relation to the prioritisation of works and operate the schemes at local level. Two OT Departments and Age Action Ireland recommended the prioritisation of works to facilitate discharge from hospital. The NRH made a case for applicants with new injuries or illnesses resulting in significant static disability being given the highest priority, such as people with complete spinal cord injuries.

One submission argued that the term 'palliative', as used in the prioritisation criteria should be defined clearly to avoid inappropriate/unnecessary adaptations. The Irish Hospice Foundation recommended a fast track approach for those who have received a diagnosis that they may have less than twelve months to live. Finally, the AOTI argued that the person responsible for prioritising applications should have some medical background.

Introduce a timeline (7): Seven submissions argued that the timeframe for getting a final decision can be too long and there was often a lack of clarity for the applicant, regarding the status of their application. The introduction of an indicative timeline was suggested by two of these submissions, which would give the applicant an idea of what steps are involved in the process and roughly how long each should take. It was suggested that applicants should also be issued with an acknowledgement letter on receipt of their application and regularly updated on the status of their application, including their position on the waiting list and an estimated timeframe until approval is granted. It was also suggested that the local authorities should be required to make a decision and inform applicants within a specified period of time, with sanctions applying where these timeframes are not met. Finally, a County Council suggested the introduction of a timeframe for accepting applications in any one year.

Standardise the grant process (7): Seven submissions called for the standardisation of the grant process nationally. It was argued that the process applied to each application must be consistent nationally, in order to achieve equity and transparency for all. A typical observation was:

The Grant Schemes were designed to provide adaptations on the basis of a person's need. As the schemes currently operate, the allocation of funding is based on the amount of money available to the local authority, rather than on the need for grants which exist in their area. There is a strong need to ensure that the decisions made to accept or reject applications under the schemes are standardised across the country.

The introduction of an appeals system was also recommended.

Increase inter-agency collaboration (6): Six submissions identified a need for more communication and collaboration between the HSE and the local authorities. Two submissions suggest a jointly-funded OT post. Three others suggested increased

liaison and quarterly meetings between HSE OTs and local authority staff, as a means of improving communication. The Citizen's Information Board suggested introducing a protocol between the HSE and the local authorities, along similar lines to the protocol for dealing with the housing aspects of the Assessment of Need carried out as part of the implementation of the Disability Act 2005.

Provide applicants with assistance in selecting contractors (6): Maintaining a list of approved contractors was suggested by six of the submissions. It was reported that applicants experience considerable difficulties in getting estimates and finding reliable builders with the appropriate skills. Older people without family support can find this particularly difficult.

Improve communication between all parties involved (5): Five submissions identified a need to improve channels of communication between all of the parties involved, including applicants, local authorities, OTs, contractors, engineers, architects and so on.

Remove the applicant's 5 per cent contribution (5): Five submissions suggested the removal of the applicant's contribution of 5 per cent of the costs, which is required under the HAG Scheme. It was argued that 5 per cent of the cost of some of the more expensive adaptations can be prohibitive for many people on low incomes.

Improve quality of information provided (4): A private OT argued that applicants should be provided with clearer information on the cost of items, such as tiles and rails, to avoid vulnerable people being taken advantage of by builders. Two submissions suggested making the general information about the schemes provided to the public more easy-to-read, user-friendly and accessible. The development of a step-by-step booklet to clarify the process of applying for the grant and getting the works done, emphasising that works cannot commence without prior approval was also suggested.

Undertake final inspections of work (3): According to the AOTI, many OTs have expressed serious concerns regarding a lack of local authority inspectors, to ensure that grant-funded works have been carried out to the proper specifications and meet the needs of the client. The AOTI recommended that all completed works should be inspected prior to payment of the grant. Two further submissions support this

assessment, stating that lack of inspection can lead to shoddy work and abuse of the system through fraudulent claims.

Introduce a claw-back provision (3): Kilkenny County Council suggested that grants should be classed as a charge on the property or an equity share in the property, to enable the grant to be repaid to the local authority. This would generate rolling funds in the future. This was echoed by South Dublin County Council, particularly in cases where the long-term beneficiary of the adaptations may not be the applicant. For example, adaptations to private-rented accommodation and also adaptations to a relative's home where the applicant, who is also a homeowner, will not be resident until the adaptations are complete. However, another submission argued that, where a person had to move due to increased disability, it would be unfair to reclaim the funding provided and might impede them from moving to a more appropriate care setting, and in the interviews with local authorities some officials felt the claw-back would lead to a lot of administration for limited financial return (see section 3.10).

Introduce tax relief on expenditure on housing adaptations (3):

Housing adaptations are not classed as an allowable medical expense for tax deduction purposes. Presumably, this was justified by the provision of universal grant aid on the basis of medical need, under the old Disabled Persons Grant Scheme. Three submissions make the case that the introduction of means-testing under the new schemes means that people who are not eligible for grant funding must now take out mortgages to cover the cost of adaptations. This is particularly problematic for people with progressive conditions whose future earning potential is not assured. A tax allowance for expenditure on housing adaptations was suggested.

Review the scope of the HOP Scheme (3): A wide range of types of works may currently be funded under the HOP Scheme. Two submissions suggest that the types of works eligible for grant funding should be reviewed, as the broad scope of the scheme can lead to disappointment for many applicants who cannot be accommodated. Another recommended the minimum age of applicant should be 65 years.

Replace the requirement for a GP letter with an OT report (2): Two submissions argued that submitting a report from an OT with the application would be more

appropriate than a letter from a GP, as an OT is a specialist in functional assessment and assistive technologies.

Introduce a generic application form (2): Limerick Advocacy Service argued that it would be better if applicants could complete and submit a generic application form. The local authority could then advise the applicant for which scheme they qualify, on the basis of the information supplied. A similar approach was recommended by Longford County Council Housing and Planning SPC.

Number of quotations required (2): South Dublin County Council suggested that the number of quotations to be sought for proposed works should be increased to three, in order to ensure greater competitiveness and value for money. Another submission argued, however, that it was difficult for applicants to get multiple quotes.

Increase supply of accessible housing (2): The Irish Hospice Foundation pointed out that for those with life-limiting diseases, such as dementia and heart failure, adaptations can require frequent modification. The Foundation recommended that the principle of lifetime adaptable housing should be adopted by the housing grant system for people with such conditions. Kathy Sinnott, MEP, suggested that the local authorities should purchase appropriate houses, such as bungalows, during the slump in the housing market which would require less adaptation in order to accommodate future needs.

Notify local authorities of their annual allocation at the start of the year (2): Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council argued that the local authorities should be notified of their annual allocation prior to/at the beginning of the start of the year. This would ensure that local authorities can avoid going over-budget or having to change their prioritisation policy during the year. Longford County Council recommended more funding be allocated to the schemes.

Review the method of budget allocation (1): The Kildare Network of People with Disabilities in Ireland made the case that the allocation of funding to different local authorities is not based on the levels of need in each area and is geographically inequitable. It is suggested that grant funding under the schemes should be allocated centrally.

Clarify the differences between the two grant schemes for people with a disability

(1): An OT department found the application forms for the HAG and the MAG Schemes confusing, making it difficult to determine to which scheme to apply for items like ramps and level-access showers.

Include the SEI schemes (1): Limerick County Council suggested that consideration be given to including the Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI) schemes under the umbrella of the housing grant schemes (now Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland).

Require submission of P21 as evidence of income (1): South Dublin County Council suggested that a P21 balancing statement should be submitted as evidence of income in all cases. While applicants may be in receipt of a social welfare pension, they may also have income from other sources so it was argued that copies of the pension book should not suffice.

Replace monthly returns with quarterly returns (1): Donegal County Council suggested that the DEHLG should require returns from the local authorities on a quarterly basis, rather than the monthly returns required at present.

Introduce staged payment of building contractors (1): Currently, building contractors are not paid until the work is completed and it was reported that there is often a six-week delay in receiving payment. A building contractor made a case for the introduction of staged payments; the first in the middle of the job and the second on completion. It was argued that the first payment is needed to cover materials, as suppliers will only give one month's credit.

Supply the applicant with a copy of their OT report (1): A HSE OT suggested that OT reports should be sent to the applicant, including diagrams and specifications for the alterations to be carried out. This would help to ensure that there is no ambiguity regarding the interpretation of the works to be carried out.

Extend Approved Housing Body (AHB) mortgage agreements under the voluntary housing capital funding schemes to cover major adaptations (1): Clúid Housing Association highlighted several difficulties particular to AHBs, in relation to the operation of the new grant schemes. It was reported that some local authorities expect AHBs to

cover the cost of adaptations from the management and maintenance allowance. It was argued that this allowance was not intended to cover capital costs and, in any case, was insufficient to cover the costs of adaptations. Furthermore, it was reported that some local authorities expect the AHB to submit the application on behalf of the tenant. This is not in line with the DEHLG guidelines, which merely require the written consent of the landlord and evidence of the duration of the tenancy. This administrative burden has resource implications for the AHB. It was suggested that, as AHBs have a mortgage agreement with local authorities for each estate funded under the capital funding schemes, it should be possible to agree an extension of the initial mortgage with the local authority to cover major adaptations or extensions. This would provide another avenue of funding for housing adaptations for AHB tenants.

Introduce a Letter of Guarantee (1): The Carers' Association recommended that a letter of guarantee should be issued to successful applicants by the local authority, to be used to secure a bank or Credit Union loan to undertake the adaptation work, pending final payment by the Authority.

2.5 Comments:

General comments made in the submissions are discussed below. These comments are not listed in any particular order as most were raised in just one submission.

Lack of OT assessment requirement (2): Two submissions identified a risk that adaptations undertaken under the MAG Scheme may prove unsuitable for the applicant, as assessment by an OT is not required under this scheme.

Penalising carers (1): Means testing on the basis of household income means that, in some cases, a family caring for an older relative or child with a disability cannot avail of the grant. The cost of works without grant aid is often more than the family can afford.

Lack of awareness regarding retrospective payments (1): A hospital OT department reported that applicants are often not aware that work cannot commence without the prior approval of the local authority and the grant cannot be paid retrospectively.

Lack of accommodation choice (1): Few people with disabilities can secure suitable accommodation by moving house. Most people remain in their existing home, rather

than going into hospital or residential care, even though it may greatly circumscribe their own and their families' lives.

Profound effect on well-being of extra time in hospital (1): The NRH has noted a serious impact on the emotional well-being of patients, if they are forced to spend time in hospital after their discharge date. Equally, if people with disabilities are discharged from hospital to accommodation that restricts their mobility and level of independence, their programme of rehabilitation can be compromised.

Advocate involvement advantageous (1): The Citizens' Information Board highlighted the importance of the role of independent advocates in assisting applicants during the application process. Concern was expressed regarding how those without an advocate fare.

Offer to exchange for local authority housing (1): The AOTI recommended that consideration be given to introducing a scheme whereby applicants could be offered accessible local authority accommodation in exchange for their own home, in extreme cases.

Adaptation catered for at design stage (1): The ICSH highlighted the need to ensure that adaptations for people with disabilities, or the possibilities for adapting due to acquired disabilities, are integrated at the design and construction stage of every new building.

Local authorities could contract builders themselves (1): Limerick Advocacy Service recommended that consideration be given to the local authorities contracting builders to undertake adaptation works, which would make the process easier for applicants. It was also suggested that the local authorities could supply materials in bulk at a cheaper rate so the grant would only cover labour.

3. Local Authority Survey and Interviews

3.1 Introduction

The local authorities play a key role in the housing adaptation grant process, as they are responsible for part-funding and administering the schemes. A postal questionnaire survey was administered to all county and city councils in May 2009, which comprised four sections, covering background information, policies and procedures, activity during 2008 and outlook for 2009. 27 of the 34 local authorities surveyed responded to the survey. Semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of ten local authorities were also undertaken, in order to gain a more detailed understanding of their views and experiences. The results of the local authority survey and interviews are discussed below.

3.2 Valid Applications in 2008

The local authorities surveyed were asked about the number of valid applications received in 2008 under each of the three housing adaptation grant schemes. Twenty-three of the authorities surveyed gave details of activity and reported the highest level of activity under the HOP Scheme, with 5,748 applications received in total, followed by the HAG Scheme, with 4,849 received in total (see Table 3.1 below). Comparatively low levels of activity were reported in these local authorities under the MAG Scheme, with 1,666 applications received in total. Some local authorities interviewees argued that the maximum grant level available under this scheme are inadequate to meet some types of quite minor adaptations such as stairlifts, which may perhaps account for this relatively low level of activity.

Table 3.1 Valid applications, 2008

	Total Applications 2008	Average applications per L.A.	Minimum	Maximum
HOP	5,748	249.9	17	987
HAG	4,849	210.8	50	1,638
MAG	1,666	72.4	12	349

N=23

The average number of applications received per local authority under each scheme masks substantial variation in activity in 2008. The number of applications received in 2008 ranged from 17 to 987 under the HOP Scheme, 50 to 1,638 under the HAG Scheme and 12 to 349 under the MAG Scheme. This wide variation in levels of activity during 2008 may in part reflect the fact that some local authorities suspended the housing adaptation grant schemes for some period during 2008.

The vast majority of grants paid under each of the three housing adaptation grant schemes in 2008 funded adaptations to owner-occupied homes (Table 3.2). The local authorities surveyed estimated that, on average, less than 3 per cent of the grants paid under any of the schemes funded adaptations to homes where the applicant had a 'right to reside', while less than 1 per cent funded adaptations to private-rented accommodation, accommodation provided under the voluntary housing funding schemes or accommodation occupied by persons living in communal residences.

Table 3.2 Grants paid broken down by tenure of applicant, 2008

	Owner occupied %	Right to reside %	Private rented %	Voluntary housing %	Communal residences %	Other %
HOP	98.1	1.4	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.3
HAG	93.8	2.9	0.3	0.7	0.1	2.0
MAG	95.7	1.2	0.1	0.3	0.0	2.4

N=22 (HOP) and 23 (HAG & MAG)

For each of the three housing adaptation grant schemes, local authorities were asked to provide a breakdown of outcomes for the applications received in 2008, into the categories of approved, refused and withdrawn prior to a decision being made (Table

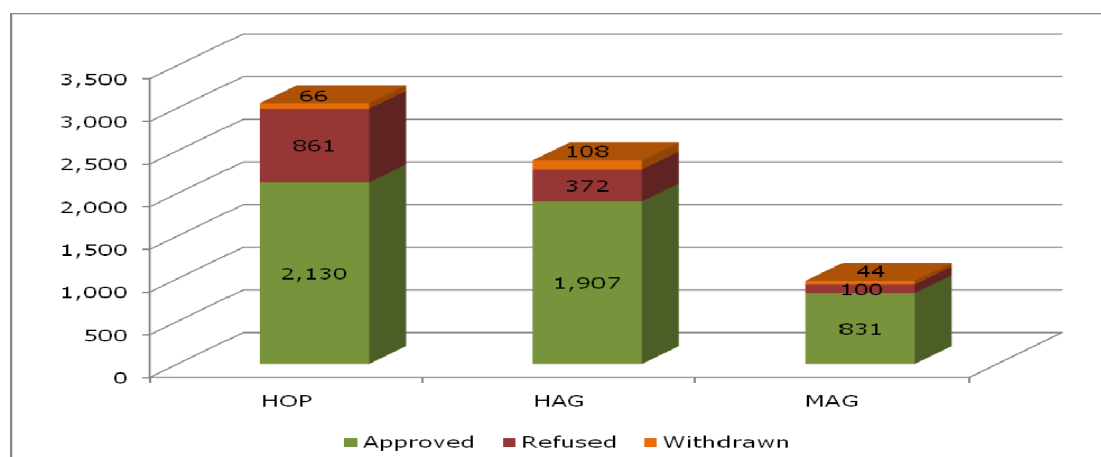
3.3 and Figure 3.1 below). Interestingly, by May 2009 or later in some cases, the local authorities which responded to the survey were only able to provide a breakdown of the outcome for 53 per cent of the applications received under the HOP Scheme, 49 per cent of the applications received under the HAG Scheme and 59 per cent of the applications received under the MAG Scheme. This suggests that decisions had not yet been reached for the remainder of the applications received in 2008, which were either still being processed, which seems unlikely, or had been placed on a waiting list awaiting developments regarding funding.

The majority of the applications for which a decision had been reached were approved. The scheme with the highest refusal rate was the HOP Scheme (28 per cent), followed by the HAG Scheme (16 per cent), while the MAG Scheme had the lowest refusal rate (10 per cent).

Table 3.3 Application Outcomes, 2008

	Approved %	Refused %	Withdrawn %
HOP	70	28	2
HAG	80	16	5
MAG	85	10	5

Figure 3.1 Application outcomes, 2008



3.3 Staffing

A total of 189 local authority staff were working on the implementation of the housing adaptation grant schemes in the 27 local authorities surveyed; 47.5 on a full-time basis and 141.5 on a part-time basis. Staffing levels ranged from three to fourteen, with an average of seven. The majority of the staff working on the housing adaptation grant schemes were administrators (49 per cent), followed by engineers (20 per cent) and clerks of works (19 per cent), with smaller numbers of social workers (9 per cent) and staff falling within the 'other' category, (7 per cent), involved in the schemes. The 'other' category primarily comprised technical staff, described as inspectors, electrical inspectors, building control staff and technicians, while one authority included the higher grade (Grade V and Grade VIII) staff managing the schemes within this category. A breakdown of staff working on the schemes is given in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 Breakdown of staff working on the schemes

Category of Staff	F-T / P-T	Total staff	Mean staff per L.A.	Min.	Max.
Administ-rative	full-time	38.5	1.4	0	8
	part-time	54.5	2	0	10
Social workers	full-time	3	0.1	0	3
	part-time	6	0.2	0	3
Engineers	full-time	0	0	0	0
	part-time	38	1.4	0	6
Clerks of works	full-time	5	0.2	0	2
	part-time	30	1.1	0	4
Other	full-time	1	0.0	0	1
	part-time	13	0.5	0	5

N=27

3.4 Prioritisation

The majority of local authorities prioritise applications for payment under the housing adaptation grant schemes but some do not. Twenty (74 per cent) of the 27 local authorities surveyed reported that they prioritised applications under the HOP Scheme, while 23 (85 per cent) prioritised under the HAG and the MAG Schemes.

In order to gather information on the types of systems of prioritisation in use, the survey asked local authorities to rate the weight given to various factors within their system of prioritisation. These findings are now outlined.

HOP Scheme: As Table 3.5 shows, under the HOP Scheme, the condition of the property, the need for the works in order to return home from hospital or nursing home and the presence of any medical condition or disability were the factors rated the most important within the systems of prioritisation operated by the local authorities who responded to the survey.

HAG Scheme: Just over half (15 local authorities; 57 per cent) of the 27 local authorities surveyed were using the scheme of prioritisation recommended within the DEHLG's guidance for the HAG Scheme. Table 3.6 shows that the need for works in order to return home from hospital or nursing home was the most frequent priority under the scheme, with the applicant's level of functioning and degree of dependence on carers also ranking highly.

MAG Scheme Under the MAG Scheme, Table 3.7 shows that the three factors rated most important in the systems of prioritisation operated by the local authorities were the same as the HAG scheme - need for adaptations in order to return home, level of functioning and degree of dependence on carers. Where 'other' was ranked highly, this tended to be in cases where an applicant's medical condition (for instance terminally ill) was given high priority.

It was clear from the interviews with local authority officials that they did find prioritising difficult at times, typical comments were:

It's a hard call. For example, should we give ten small grants or one big grant? How do you say one person is more needy than another?

So long as the range of things that can be funded is so broad and it's open to half the country, there will be a long waiting list because the funding can only go so far.

Table 3.5 Prioritisation under the HOP Scheme

	Rating (frequency, <i>i.e.</i> no. of local authorities)							Not rated	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Condition of the property	11	3	7	1	0	0	0	4	26
Medical condition or disability	2	11	4	0	2	0	0	6	25
Need for works in order to return home	11	1	3	1	1	1	0	7	25
Age	1	1	2	2	5	0	0	14	25
Income	0	0	0	4	0	6	0	15	25
Length of time on waiting list	1	3	1	4	3	2	0	11	25
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	22	24

Table 3.6 Prioritisation under the HAG Scheme

	Rating (frequency, <i>i.e.</i> no. of local authorities)							Not rated	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Level of functioning	5	8	6	0	0	0	0	6	25
Degree of dependence on carers	2	8	7	0	0	0	0	8	25
Need for works in order to return home	16	1	2	1	0	0	0	5	25
Age	0	0	1	7	3	3	0	10	24
Income	0	0	0	1	3	6	0	14	24
Length of time on waiting list	1	0	2	5	4	1	0	12	25
Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	20	23

Table 3.7 Prioritisation under the MAG Scheme

	Rating (frequency, <i>i.e.</i> no. of local authorities)							Not rated	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Level of functioning	5	6	8	0	0	0	0	5	24
Degree of dependence on carers	2	10	5	0	0	0	0	7	24
Need for works in order to return home	16	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	24
Age	0	0	0	6	3	3	0	11	23
Income	0	0	0	1	3	6	0	13	23
Length of time on waiting list	1	0	2	5	4	1	0	11	24
Other	3	0	0	0	0	0	2	18	23

3.5 OT Assessments

Practice varied in relation to whether or not applicants for housing adaptation grants were required to have an assessment by an OT as part of the application process. Under the HOP Scheme, the majority of respondents to this question (64 per cent) never required an OT assessment, while the remaining 9 (36 per cent) sometimes required one and none of the respondents always required one (Figure 3.2). This was not surprising, as the HOP Scheme aims to improve poor housing conditions rather than accessibility.

Under the HAG Scheme, of the 26 respondent local authorities, 12 each stated that they 'always' or 'sometimes' required an OT assessment. There were just 2 authorities that never require an OT assessment for HAG. Seventeen of the 26 respondents sometimes required OT assessment for the MAG Scheme. There were just 6 local authorities who always required an OT assessment for MAG and 3 who did not have this requirement.

Respondents were asked to specify the circumstances under which an OT assessment is 'sometimes' needed and the responses included:

- when the applicant has stated that they suffer from a debilitating illness
- when there is not a clear need for the works requested
- it depends on the works to be done and the level of disability.

The relatively high proportions of local authorities sometimes or never requiring an OT assessment under the two schemes for people with disabilities is noteworthy. The role of the OT is to undertake a functional assessment of the applicant and to make recommendations on the most appropriate housing adaptations to meet their needs. However, as emerged from the interviews with local authorities this can also lead to additional works identified:

An OT might visit the person's house and recommend a lot of extra work and make the job much bigger..... It could turn an application for a €5,000 job into a €20,000 job.

Also, some people look for extensions when a stairlift will do and the PTS will tend to provide reports supporting that. They look at the whole house, listing everything that needs to be done to make it fully accessible. Applicants are often under the impression that they will get everything on the list.

One local authority official explained:

Professional indemnity is the problem. They can't just look at the shower if there are other problems. Our technician is the same, he can't just look at the roof if the wiring is terrible.

OT Assessments Undertaken in 2008

Twenty-one local authorities provided details of how many of their applicants for the new housing adaptation grants were required to undergo an assessment by an OT. None of these applicants for the HOP Scheme had OT assessments. However, half (1,525; 50 per cent) of applicants to the HAG Scheme and one-in-eight (144; 12 per cent) of applicants to the MAG Scheme were required to have OT assessments in 2008.

New arrangements, designed to improve timely access to OT assessments, were introduced under the new housing adaptation grant schemes. Local authorities may now refer the applicant to the community OT or an OT working in private practice. The local authority may recoup €200 towards the private OT's fee from the DEHLG. Alternatively, the local authority may ask the applicant to engage a private OT directly and the €200 payment will be recouped to the applicant as part of their grant.

The local authorities' survey showed that the new arrangements for OT assessments had proved popular. Eleven of the local authorities (46 per cent) were using the community OT, while the majority (13 local authorities; 54 per cent) were using private OTs retained by the local authority either on a contract or on a case-by-case basis and 9 (38 per cent) were using private OTs engaged directly by the applicant. Nine of the survey respondents (38 per cent) were using a combination of these three options. In the interviews, officials commented that they did not have the workload to warrant having an OT in-house.

Waiting times for an OT assessment varied substantially, depending on the arrangements in place. The average waiting time for a HSE OT was the longest at 23.5 weeks, although it varied substantially, from a minimum of 2 weeks to a maximum of 115 weeks. The average waiting times for OTs in private practice were much shorter, at 4.9 weeks for private OTs engaged by the local authority and 2.5 weeks for private OTs engaged directly by the applicant (see Table 3.8).

Table 3.8 Waiting times for OT assessments

	Mean waiting time for an appointment (weeks)	Minimum (weeks)	Maximum (weeks)
HSE OT (6)	23.5	2	115
Private OT engaged by the local authority (12)	4.9	2	16
Private OT engaged by the applicant (2)	2.5	1	4

Under the HAG Scheme, just 15 per cent of the 573 applicants who engaged a private OT themselves in 2008, in the 6 respondent local authorities using this system, had recouped this payment. Under the MAG Scheme, 41 applicants in 4 local authorities engaged an OT directly and just 2 had recouped the payment. This raises concerns regarding unsuccessful applicants perhaps being unable to recoup the cost of the private OT assessment and successful applicants having to bear the cost of the OT assessment for a long period of time, which they may not be able to afford, pending the completion of the works and payment of the grant.

3.6 Others Involved in Assessing and Prioritising Applications

In addition to OTs, several other members of local authority and HSE staff are involved in assessing and/or prioritising applications. Administrative staff are involved in assessing and prioritising applications in almost all of the local authorities that responded to the survey (see Table 3.9). Local authority clerks of works and engineers also played an important role in many local authorities. Local authority social workers did not tend to be involved in the housing adaptation grant schemes in most local authorities, although their involvement was slightly higher in the case of the HOP Scheme.

Table 3.9 Others involved in assessment of applications

	HOP	HAG	MAG
Local authority administrative staff	26 (96.3%)	25 (92.6%)	25 (92.6%)
Local authority social workers	5 (18.5%)	6 (22.2%)	4 (14.8%)
Local authority engineers	15 (55.6%)	14 (51.9%)	13 (48.1%)
Local authority clerks of works	16 (59.3%)	12 (44.4%)	12 (44.4%)
HSE Medical Officer	2 (7.4%)	5 (18.5%)	5 (18.5%)
Other	7 (25.9%)	8 (29.6%)	8 (29.6%)

N=27

3.7 Waiting Time

The length of time from receiving a valid application to notifying the applicant of a final decision reported by the local authorities that responded to the survey varied substantially, as outlined in Table 3.10, 3.11 and 3.12 overleaf). Waiting times for eligible applicants varied from less than a week to 31.6 weeks, with average waiting times of between 9.1 weeks and 11.6 weeks, depending on the scheme and whether or not an assessment by an OT was required.

Applications from people who are ineligible for grant aid, perhaps due to not satisfying the means test or the age requirement, appear to be efficiently dealt with by the local authorities under all three housing adaptation grant schemes.

Waiting times ranged from less than a week to eight weeks, with an average wait of 2.3 weeks for notification of a decision.

Table 3.10 Application processing times under the HOP Scheme

	Average (weeks)	Minimum (weeks)	Maximum (weeks)	Responses
Ineligible cases	2.3	0.1	8	21
Approval or refusal without OT assessment	10.5	2	31	16
Approval or refusal with OT assessment	11.6	4	31	5

Table 3.11 Application processing times under the HAG Scheme

	Average (weeks)	Minimum (weeks)	Maximum (weeks)	Responses
Ineligible cases	2.3	0	8	22
Approval or refusal without OT assessment	10.4	2	29.6	11
Approval or refusal with OT assessment	11.2	0	29.6	16

Table 3.12 Application processing times under the MAG Scheme

	Average (weeks)	Minimum (weeks)	Maximum (weeks)	Responses
Ineligible cases	2.3	0	8	22
Approval or refusal without OT assessment	9.5	2	31.6	14
Approval or refusal with OT assessment	9.1	0	31.6	14

Whether or not an assessment by an OT was required did not seem to have a substantial impact on waiting times. Under the HOP Scheme, it was reported that applicants requiring an OT assessment waited an average of 1.1 weeks longer to receive a decision, while applicants under the HAG Scheme waited an average of 0.8 weeks longer. Surprisingly, the average waiting time under the MAG Scheme was actually 0.4 weeks less, in the case of applicants requiring an OT assessment.

There was some evidence that the MAG Scheme may be operating as a fast-track scheme, as applicants appear to receive notification of a decision slightly faster than applicants under the HAG Scheme. It was reported that, on average, applicants were notified of decisions 0.9 weeks faster without an OT assessment and 2.1 weeks faster with an OT assessment under the MAG Scheme (see Tables 3.11 and 3.12). However, several local authority interviewees felt that any time savings are due to the MAG Scheme generally being used for smaller, more straightforward adaptations due to the lower funding limit, rather than any mechanisms to fast-track applications being built into the scheme. As one official interviewed explained:

The MAG Scheme is faster because the requirements are less. We just look for one quote and there is no planning permission or drawings to be submitted so it's just the way it works out. We do try to make sure that people go in under the right scheme. There are not as many people looking for funding under the MAG Scheme so we can turn them around faster. And they are more straightforward applications, as they're just for one adaptation.....

The official went on to note that the MAG Scheme can respond quickly to an urgent need:

We can turn an application around urgently within days. It's always been clear that the MAG Scheme is supposed to be fast-track so our clerk-of-works turns the applications around quickly.

Views on whether the MAG Scheme operates effectively as a fast-track scheme for minor works were mixed, however, among the local authorities which responded to the survey. The majority (13 local authorities; 52 per cent) expressed the view that it does operate effectively as a fast-track scheme but a substantial minority of 48 per cent (12 local authorities) did not concur. Most of the local authority interviewees argued that applicants must supply the same documentation for each scheme, such as GP letters, OT reports, evidence of income and quotes from contractors, making it difficult to fast-track the MAG Scheme. One official noted:

The people in the section said that it doesn't work any faster but when we looked through the stats it actually is faster.

3.8 Panel of Contractors

Panels of contractors were introduced under the new housing adaptation grant schemes, with DEHLG guidance recommending that local authorities advertise for interested contractors to join the list, which would be made available to applicants. It was anticipated that this measure would make it easier for applicants to get the requisite number of quotes and to engage a contractor, which had been identified as a problem with the operation of the old housing adaptation grant schemes.

Implementation of this measure by the local authorities appears to have been quite limited, with more than half of the 27 local authorities surveyed (17 local authorities; 63 per cent) reporting that they did not maintain a panel of contractors. Liability emerged as the local authorities' primary concern regarding the panel of contractors, as many local authority interviewees argued that applicants may think that the local authority was recommending the contractors included on the list or guaranteeing the quality of their work. Some interviewees also argued that their local authority did not wish to be seen as favouring certain businesses over others by promoting them for grant-funded work. One official explained:

No and there are a couple of reasons. First, there's liability if we were recommending a bad contractor, we would be liable. At the moment, we might give verbal advice if we had reports of a bad contractor, we err on the side of caution. Second, there's the procedure of advertising. They would need to provide us with evidence of insurance, health and safety and tax compliance. It would seriously limit the number of contractors and the schemes would slow down if only fifteen or twenty contractors were available to do the work. At the moment, people always have the option of going somewhere else if they're not happy with a contractor.

Of the ten local authorities that did maintain a panel of contractors, eight updated the panel as required, with no formal review period. The two remaining local authorities had set dates for reviewing their panel of contractors, after a period of fifteen months in one case and two years in the other.

The ten local authorities that reported that they did maintain a panel of contractors did not generally make it widely available. Only one posted the panel of contractors on the local authority website, while three included the panel of contractors with printed information on the schemes provided to applicants. The majority (6 local

authorities) provided the panel of contractors to applicants on request. A typical comment was:

We do have a list of contractors and we find we need the list because people haven't got a clue how to go about organising it. We give them the list but I don't want the council to end up party to the contract.

3.9 Schedule of Standard Costs

Schedules of standard costs were introduced under the new housing adaptation grant schemes, in order to control costs. Implementation of this measure by the local authorities appears to have been quite limited. Just over half of the 27 local authorities surveyed (14 local authorities; 52 per cent) had opted not to maintain a schedule of standard costs. The local authority interviewees' main concern in this regard was that there were wide variations in types of adaptation works and house condition, making it very difficult to develop and keep up-to-date a meaningful schedule of standard costs. A preference was expressed in some cases for relying on the expertise of local authority engineers and clerks of works, as it was argued that they are very familiar with current costs in the area.

Of the 13 local authorities that did maintain a schedule of standard costs, seven updated the schedules as required, with no formal review period. The six remaining local authorities had a set review period for their schedules of standard costs. Three of these local authorities specified a one year review period, while one specified a longer review period of two years.

3.10 Funding and Budgetary Issues

The survey found that most authorities surveyed did not stipulate maximum levels of grant aid that may be awarded for different types of works. However, 6 local authorities (22 per cent) did stipulate maximum levels of grant aid for various types of works under the HOP Scheme, while 7 local authorities (26 per cent) did so under both the HAG and the MAG Schemes. This imposition of additional caps on funding for various types of adaptation works by a sizeable minority of local authorities raises concerns regarding the geographically uneven application of the schemes.

A second funding issue, raised in the interviews with officials, was the timing of the budget allocation made it difficult to administer the scheme:

The budget; more than the amount we get, it's when we get it. The pressure that puts on staff and applicants; ringing them in late-May / early-June and

saying that the work has to be done by the end of October / mid-November to get paid. It puts ferocious pressure on applicants. Everything has to be fast-tracked. The initial allocation wasn't until mid-May, we were still chasing the first batch of approvals and now we have a second allocation late in the year. A few people have been very disappointed because they could find no-one to do the work in time. Allocating in May only gives us six months to do what takes ten months.

They went on to say:

If people apply late in the year - often the budget is already spent by August / September. Then, late-year applications, we tell them next year. But, it ends up being next summer not next spring. They just can't believe that they have to wait that long. We might tell them to go ahead and start if we know they won't be finished until the next allocation. But, we only do that if it's a very bad situation.

Section 99 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2009 introduces a clause for the repayment of an adaptation grant provided for the purpose of providing additional accommodation where the dwelling is subsequently sold within five years of the grant being paid. On this proposal, a note of caution was expressed by one official:

I had some experience of the tenant purchase claw-back provision there was more admin than claw-back....after two years, not one person paid back any claw-back but there was acres of paperwork.

Also in the interviews, officials were asked if they anticipated a difficulty in the local authority meeting the 20 per cent contribution. Authorities reported that in previous years, revenue from internal capital receipts, such as the sale of social housing, had been used to cover the local authority contribution. But this and other sources of revenue had reduced and meeting the 20 per cent contribution was anticipated to be more problematic in the immediate future.

3.11 Unclaimed Grants

For various reasons, applicants may decide not to go ahead with the adaptations for which they applied for a grant. Guidance issued by the DEHLG recommends that local authorities review approved grants which have not been drawn down within six months of the decision, so if the funding is no longer required, it may be reallocated to another applicant. The majority of the local authorities surveyed (17 local authorities, 63 per cent) did have a procedure in place for reviewing approved grants which have not been drawn down by the applicant within six months but a substantial minority (10 local authorities; 37 per cent) did not. Some local authority interviewees reported that their local authorities had opted to review open files on an annual rather

than six-monthly basis. It was felt that this timeframe was more in line with the length of time that it can take applicants to negotiate the application process and get construction work completed.

Most of the grant applications which were approved by the local authorities which responded to the survey but were not claimed during 2008 were awaiting the completion of the works (see Table 3.13). Indeed, the 'works not complete' category accounted for 83 per cent of unclaimed grants under the HOP Scheme, 81 per cent under the HAG Scheme and 63 per cent under the MAG Scheme. This is not surprising in the context of the timescale of undertaking more complex works. As one official noted:

A difficulty is we have €X million of grants approved but we don't know which will go ahead or which year they will be claimed.

In most other cases, the local authority did not know or did not record applicants' reasons for not claiming their grants, with the 'unknown' category accounting for 16 per cent of unclaimed grants under the HOP Scheme, 12 per cent under the HAG Scheme and 35 per cent under the MAG Scheme. The 'other' category included applicants who had not submitted quotes to the local authority and those who had died prior to claiming the grant.

Table 3.13 Reasons for not claiming approved grants, 2008

	HOP (%)	HAG (%)	MAG (%)
Works not complete	508 (83.0)	472 (81.0)	138 (62.7)
Works not built to specifications	0 (0.0)	7 (1.2)	1 (0.5)
Applicant did not go ahead with works because of change in circumstances	1 (0.2)	4 (0.7)	0 (0.0)
Applicant not prepared to build to local authority's specifications	0 (0.0)	4 (0.7)	0 (0.0)
Cost of works exceeded maximum grant	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Cost of works increased since quote provided	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.5)
Unknown	99 (16.2)	68 (11.7)	76 (34.5)
Other	3 (0.5)	28 (4.8)	4 (1.8)
Total Unclaimed Grants 2008	612 (100)	583 (100)	220 (100)

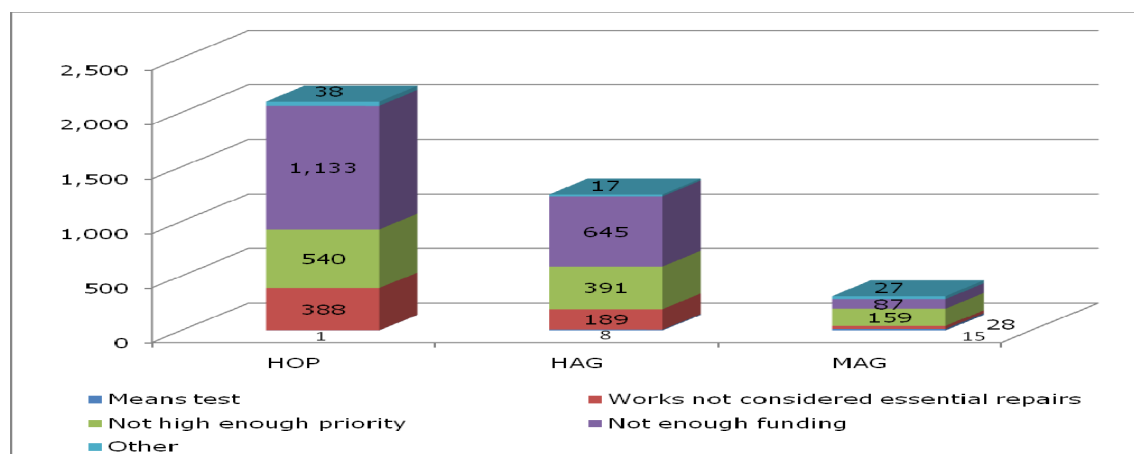
N=20 (HOP & MAG) and 21 (HAG)

3.12 Reasons for Not Approving Applications for Funding

The local authorities surveyed described substantially more applicants as ‘not approved for funding’ than ‘refused’ in 2008. Practice varied but some local authority interviewees reported that their local authorities place eligible applicants on a waiting list rather than refusing a grant, pending the availability of funding, which accounts for this discrepancy.

‘Not enough funding’ was the primary reason reported by the local authorities surveyed for not approving grants for payment in 2008 under both the HOP Scheme and the HAG Scheme, followed by ‘not high enough priority’ – see Figure 3.2. Under the MAG Scheme, the most common reason for not approving grants for payment was ‘not high enough priority’, followed by ‘not enough funding’. Several local authority interviewees reported that their local authorities were only funding ‘priority 1’ applicants, due to insufficient funding to pay grants to all eligible applicants. Thus, the ‘not high enough priority’ category is closely related to the funding issue.

Figure 3.2 Reasons for not approving applications for funding, 2008



The ‘works not considered essential repairs’ category under the HOP Scheme or the ‘proposed adaptations were not considered necessary’ category under the two schemes for people with disabilities was the third most common reason for not approving a grant for payment in 2008 under all of the three schemes.

Few applications were refused on the grounds of not satisfying the means test under any of the three schemes. This category may be slightly under-reported, as some

local authority interviewees pointed out that their local authorities would not consider applications from people who did not meet the means test to be valid applications.

3.13 Submissions from Political Representatives

A high degree of political involvement in the three housing adaptation grant schemes characterised some local authority areas. The local authority survey respondents estimated the proportion of applicants on behalf of whom a political representative made a submission to the local authority. It was reported that, on average, submissions were made by a councillor on behalf of 46 per cent of applications under the HOP Scheme, 44 per cent of applications under the HAG Scheme and 37 per cent of applications under the MAG Scheme, as outlined in Table 3.14. However, political involvement varied substantially, with some local authorities estimating that submissions from political representatives are made on behalf of up to 95 per cent of applicants.

Table 3.14 Submissions from political representatives

	Mean %	Minimum %	Maximum %
HOP	46	4	95
HAG	44	4	95
MAG	37	0	95

N=24

Several of the local authority interviewees argued that dealing with submissions from political representatives was very time consuming, as each enquiry regarding the status of an application must be answered individually. However, they were also adamant that such representations made no difference to the outcome of the application. Some local authorities commented that applicants often seemed to believe that political intervention had secured their grant, when this was not the case.

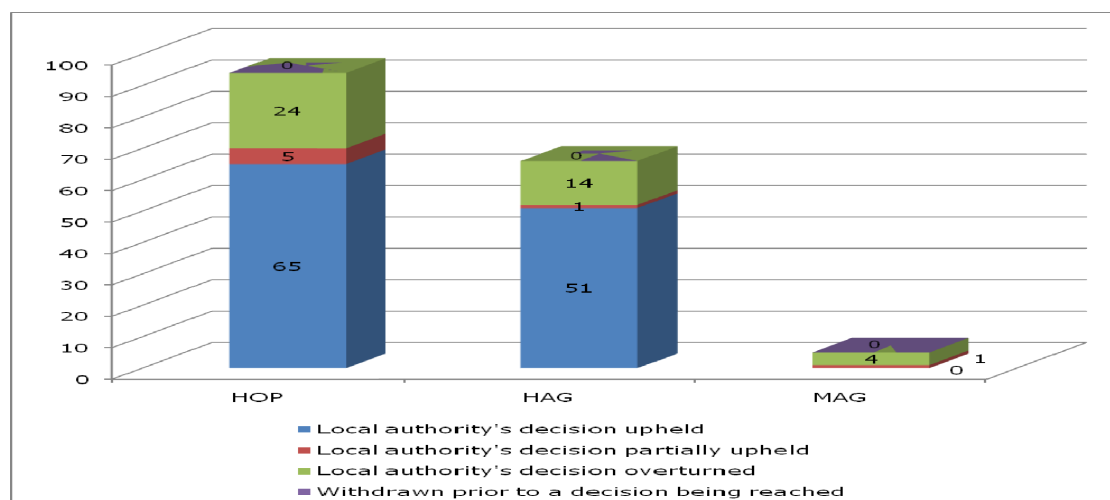
3.14 Appeals Procedures

The majority of the 27 local authorities surveyed (22 local authorities; 82 per cent) reported that they did have a written procedure for appealing against the local authority's decision. Local authorities most often provide information on how to appeal by sending it to the applicant with the decision (13 local authorities; 59 per cent), including it in printed information about the schemes (12 local authorities; 55 per cent) and/or providing it on request (7 local authorities; 32 per cent). Only one local authority reported it posted information on how to appeal on its website.

The local authorities appear to deal with appeals efficiently. The length of time from receiving a valid appeal against a decision to notifying the applicant of a final decision ranged from 1 week to 6 weeks, with an average waiting time of 3.8 weeks.

As Figure 3.3 shows, the HOP Scheme had the highest rate of appeals. The respondent local authorities received 162 appeals under the HOP Scheme, giving an average of 8 appeals per local authority, with activity ranging from 0 to 29 appeals. Under the HAG Scheme, the local authorities surveyed received 113 appeals in 2008, giving an average of 5 appeals per local authority, with activity ranging from 0 to 27 appeals. Finally, the rate of appeals under the MAG Scheme seemed very low. The local authorities surveyed received just 10 appeals under the MAG Scheme, giving an average of 0.5 appeals per local authority, with activity ranging from 0 to 2 appeals (see also Section 4.5 below).

Figure 3.3 Appeals outcomes, 2008



The usual appeal outcome was for the local authority’s decision to be upheld, under both the HOP Scheme (69 per cent) and the HAG Scheme (77 per cent). This was followed by the local authority’s decision being overturned (26 per cent and 21 per cent respectively). Relatively few local authority decisions were partially upheld and no appeals were withdrawn.

The main reason for local authorities’ decisions being overturned was the provision of additional information by the applicant, which accounted for 56 per cent of overturned decisions under the HOP Scheme and 48 per cent under the HAG Scheme. A change in the applicant’s circumstances accounted for 21 per cent of overturned decisions under the HOP Scheme and 29 per cent under the HAG Scheme. Finally, the original application being deemed eligible on review accounted for 21 per cent of overturned decisions under the HOP Scheme and 14 per cent under the HAG Scheme.

Due to the low rate of appeals under the MAG Scheme, data on outcomes is only available for five appeals. In these five cases, the local authority’s decision was not upheld in any of these cases, with the local authority’s decision being overturned in four cases and the local authority’s decision being partially upheld in one case.

3.15 Suspension of the New Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes

At least half of the local authorities surveyed had suspended one or more of the new housing adaptation grant schemes for some period during 2008. Sixteen of the local authorities surveyed (62 per cent) had suspended the HOP Scheme, 14 (54 per cent) had suspended the HAG Scheme and 13 (50 per cent) had suspended the MAG Scheme.

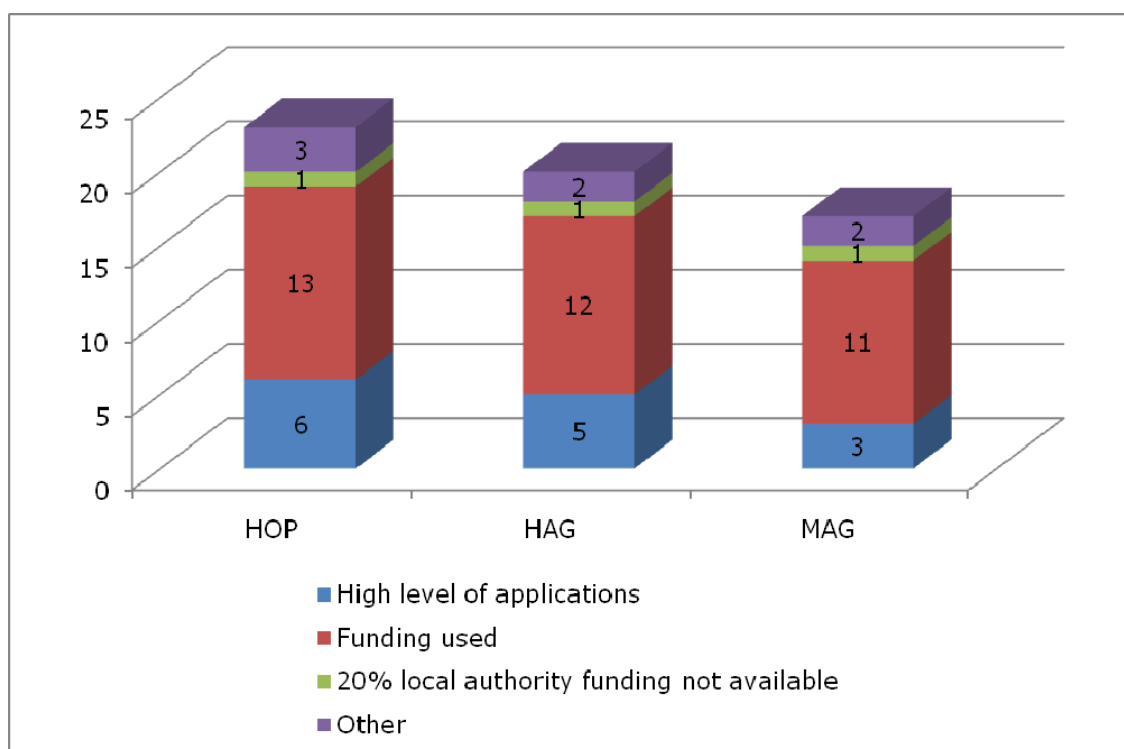
The length of time for which the new housing adaptation grant schemes were suspended in 2008 varied substantially between local authorities, from three weeks to the entire year, as summarised in Table 3.15. On average, the HOP Scheme was suspended for 20.6 weeks during 2008 by the local authorities surveyed, while the HAG Scheme was suspended for 19.7 weeks and the MAG Scheme for 20.2 weeks.

Table 3.15 Duration of suspension of schemes, 2008

	Average (weeks)	Minimum (weeks)	Maximum (weeks)	Responses
HOP	20.6	3	52	14/16
HAG	19.7	10	52	12/14
MAG	20.2	10	52	11/13

Exhaustion of the central funding allocation from the DEHLG was the primary reason given by the local authorities surveyed for suspending the housing adaptation grant schemes during 2008, while the high level of applications received was the next most important contributing factor (Figure 3.4). The local authorities must provide at least 20 per cent of each grant awarded but lack of availability of this 20 per cent funding was reported by only one of the local authorities surveyed as a factor in suspending the schemes, but in the follow-up interviews authorities did predict that this would be a bigger issue in the immediate future.

Figure 3.4 Reasons for suspension of schemes, 2008



A summary of the issues raised from the local authority questionnaires and interviews is provided below.

Box 3 Summary of Issues from Local Authority Surveys

Prioritisation:

- The majority of local authorities prioritise applications (HOP – 74%; HAG & MAG – 85%).
- 57 per cent of the local authorities surveyed were using the DEHLG scheme of prioritisation to prioritise applications under the HAG scheme.
- Practice varied in relation to whether or not applicants were assessed by an OT as part of the application process. Less than half of the local authorities surveyed (46 per cent) always required an OT assessment under the HAG scheme, while even fewer (23 per cent) always required an OT assessment under the MAG scheme.
- New arrangements for private OT assessments had proved popular, with the majority of the local authorities surveyed (54 per cent) using private OTs retained by the local authority, while 38 per cent were using private OTs engaged by the applicant.

- Waiting times for an OT assessment varied substantially depending on the arrangements in place. Waiting times for HSE OTs were longest, with an average wait of 23.5 weeks, while the waiting times for OTs in private practice were much shorter, at 4.9 weeks for private OTs engaged by the local authority and 2.5 weeks for private OTs engaged by the applicant.

Waiting Times:

- The length of time from receiving a valid application to notifying the applicant of a final decision varied substantially between local authorities, from less than a week to 31.6 weeks, with average waiting times of 9.1 weeks to 11.6 weeks, depending on the scheme and whether an OT assessment was required.
- Views were mixed on whether the MAG scheme operates effectively as a fast-track scheme (52% - yes; 48% - no).

Panel of Contractors and Schedule of Standard Costs:

- Implementation of DEHLG guidance on maintaining panels of contractors was quite low, with more than half of the local authorities surveyed (63 per cent) reporting that they did not maintain one. Liability and favouritism were key concerns.
- Implementation of DEHLG guidance on maintaining schedules of standard costs was also quite low, with just over half of the local authorities surveyed (52 per cent) opting not to maintain one. The main concern was accuracy, in the context of the wide variation in types of adaptation works and house condition.

Additional Caps on Funding:

- A minority of the local authorities surveyed stipulated maximum levels of grant aid that may be awarded for different types of works (HOP – 22 per cent, HAG & MAG – 26 per cent). These additional caps on funding raises concerns regarding the geographical inconsistencies.

Appeals:

- The majority of the local authorities surveyed (82 per cent) had a written procedure for appealing against the local authority's decision, which was usually sent to the applicant with the decision (59 per cent, included in printed information about the schemes (55 per cent) or provided on request (32 per cent)).
- The local authorities appear to deal with appeals efficiently. The length of time from receiving a valid appeal against a decision to notifying the applicant of a final decision ranged from 1 to 6 weeks, with an average waiting time of 3.8 weeks.

Procedure for Dealing with Unclaimed Grants:

- The majority of the local authorities surveyed (63 per cent) followed DEHLG guidance on reviewing approved grants which had not been drawn down within 6 months.

4. Applicants' Survey

4.1 Introduction

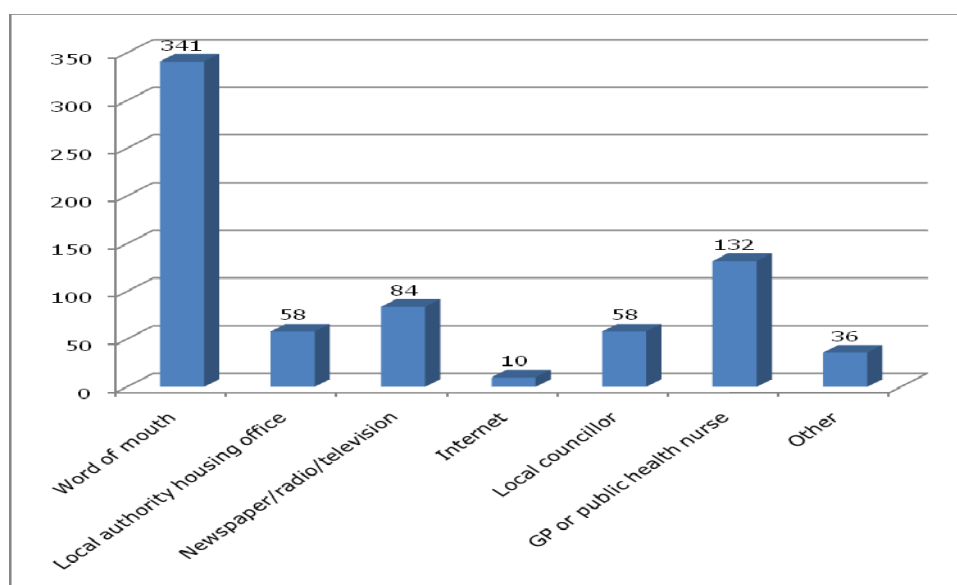
In order to capture the experiences of applicants for the new housing adaptation grant schemes, both successful and unsuccessful, a postal questionnaire survey was undertaken in nine local authority areas, during summer 2009 (see Section 1 for methodology details and Appendix V for a copy of the questionnaire used). A total of 638 responses to this survey were received and the results are discussed below.

4.2 Applying for a Grant

How did you hear about the housing grant scheme?

As Figure 4.1 shows, word of mouth emerged as by far the most important way for applicants to hear about the housing adaptation grant schemes – just over half of respondents said they heard about it that way. Medical professionals, the media, local authority housing offices and political representatives played less prominent roles in this regard.

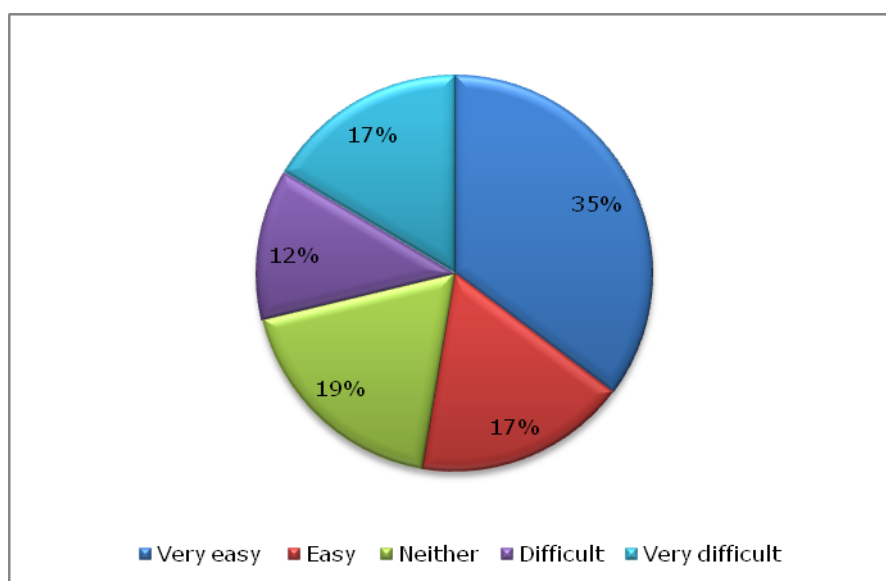
Figure 4.1 How applicants found out about the schemes, number



On a scale of 1 to 5, how did you find the application process, 1 being easy and 5 being difficult?

Just over half (51 per cent) of the applicants surveyed rated the application process as either very easy or easy (Figure 4.2). This was surprising within the context of the comments made by interviewees and focus group participants from representative organisations regarding the difficulties associated with the application process (see Section 5.3). However, a sizeable minority (28 per cent) of applicants said they found the application process either difficult or very difficult.

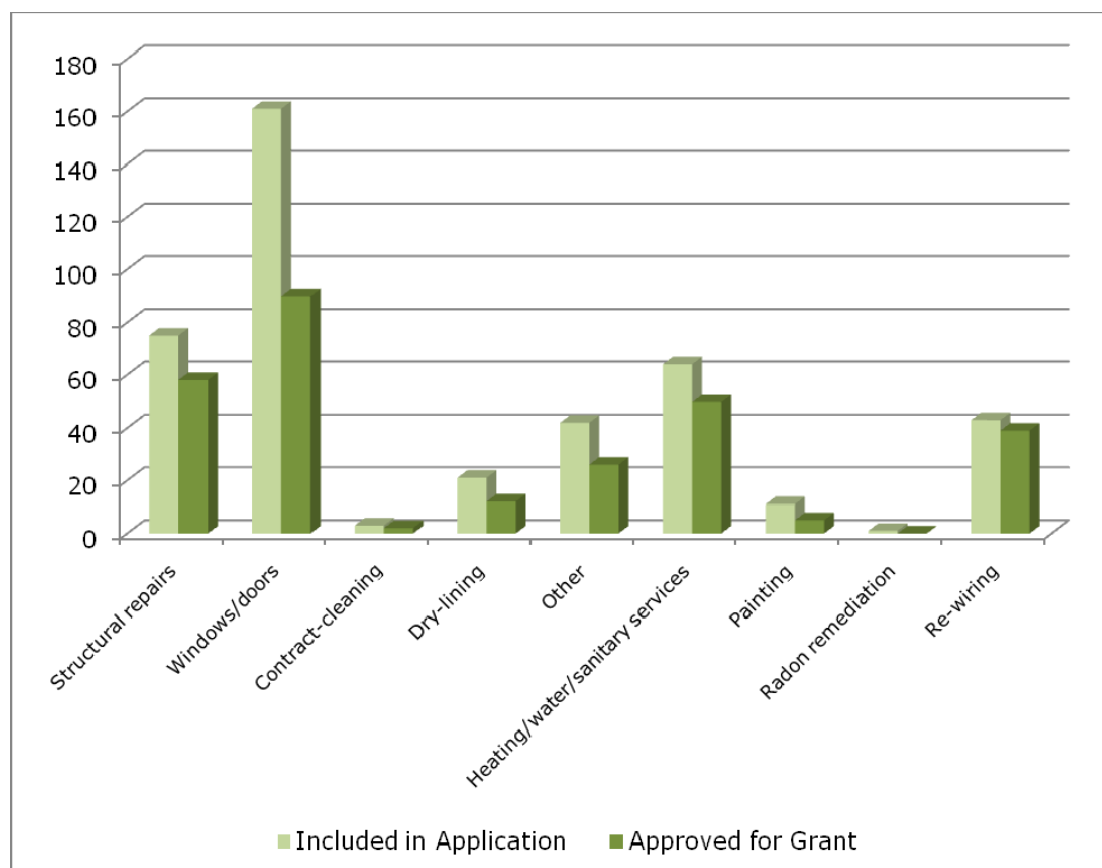
Figure 4.2 Ease of using the application process, percentage



4.3 Works sought and approved for the three schemes

HOP Scheme: Under the HOP Scheme, ‘repairs to or replacement of windows and/or doors’ was by far the most popular category of works sought by the survey respondents. As Figure 4.3 shows, this category of works was included in over half of all applications received and almost one-third of those approved. The next most popular category of works was ‘structural repairs or improvements’, which was included in one quarter of all applications and one-fifth of approved applications. This was closely followed by the ‘provision of heating, water and/or sanitary services’ category of works. Overlap with the SEAI schemes was apparent, as many of the applications under the ‘other’ category of works were for wall and/or attic insulation. Applications for ‘contract cleaning’ (3 applications) and ‘radon remediation’ (1 application) were negligible.

Figure 4.3 Categories of works sought and approved under the HOP Scheme, number



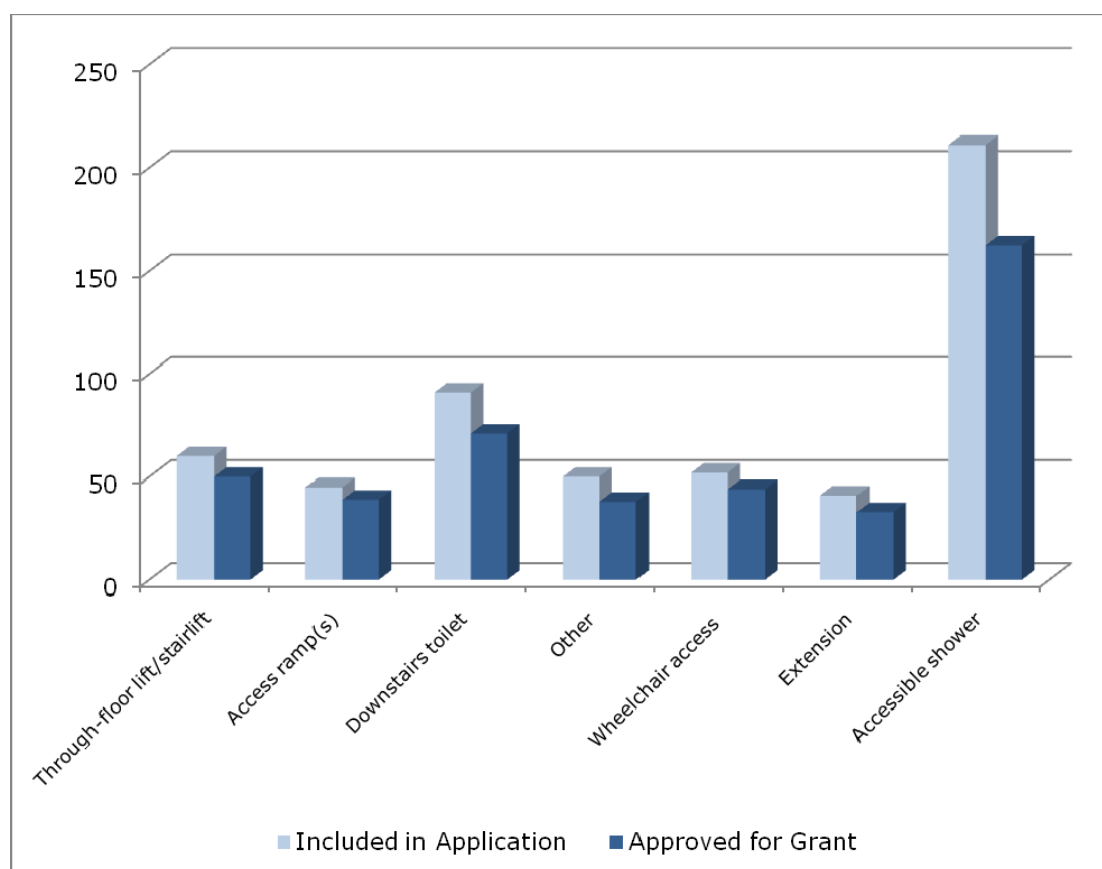
The refusal rates reported by applicants for the various categories of works funded under the HOP Scheme (Table 4.1) provides a good indication of the types of works being prioritised by the local authorities during 2008. The lowest refusal rates were for the categories of works which could be considered crucial to the structural integrity or safety of a house, including ‘rewiring’, with the lowest refusal rate of just 9 per cent, followed by the ‘provision of heating, water and/or sanitary services’, with a refusal rate of 22 per cent and structural repairs or improvements, which often included roof repairs or replacement, with a refusal rate of 23 per cent. In contrast, some of the highest refusal rates were associated with the categories of works associated with increasing the comfort and perhaps health benefits of a house, including ‘painting’, with a refusal rate of 55 per cent, ‘repairs to or replacement of windows and/or doors’, with a refusal rate of 44 per cent and ‘dry-lining’, with a refusal rate of 43 per cent.

Table 4.1 Refusal rates under the HOP Scheme

	Included in Application (number)	Approved for Grant (number)	Refusal Rate (%)
Repairs to or replacement of windows and/or doors	161	90	44.1
Structural repairs or improvements	75	58	22.7
Provision of heating, water and/or sanitary services	64	50	21.9
Re-wiring	43	39	9.3
Dry-lining	21	12	42.9
Painting	11	5	54.5
Contract-cleaning	3	2	33.3
Radon remediation	1	0	100.0
Other	42	26	38.1

HAG Scheme: Under the HAG Scheme, the provision of an ‘accessible shower’ was by far the most common category of works for which funding was sought and approved by applicants (Figure 4.4). This category of works was included in three-quarters of all applications under this scheme and over half (58 per cent) of approvals. The next most popular category of works was the provision of ‘downstairs toilet facilities’, which was included in one-third of applications and one quarter of approvals, followed by the provision of a ‘through-floor lift / stairlift’. The category of works least sought or approved under the scheme was the construction of an ‘extension’, which was included in 15 per cent of applications and approved in 12 per cent. Applications for ‘adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access’ and the provision of ‘access ramp(s)’ were also relatively low, with the inclusion of these categories of works in 19 per cent and 16 per cent of applications respectively.

Figure 4.4 Categories of works sought and approved under the HAG Scheme, number



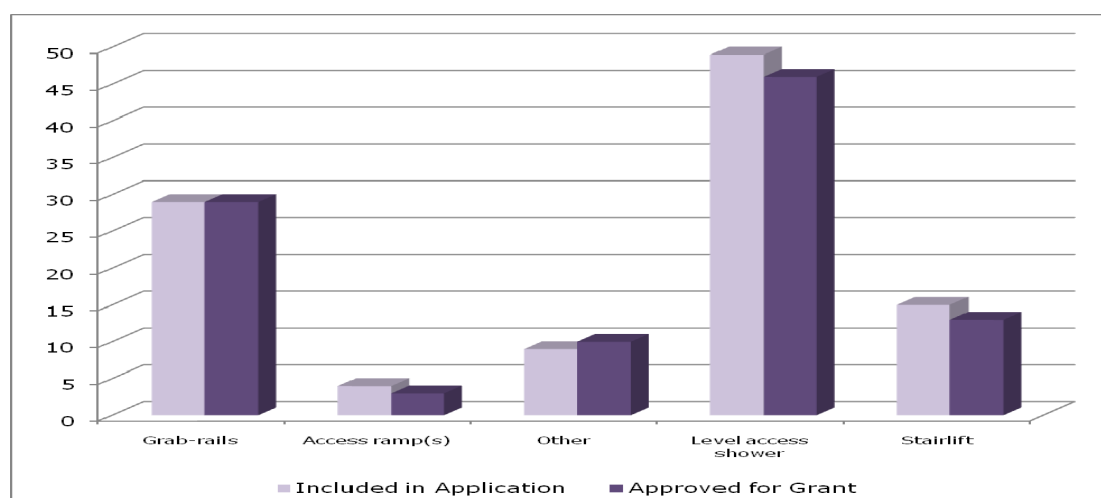
In marked contrast to the HOP Scheme, refusal rates under the HAG Scheme did not exceed one-quarter of applications under any category of works (Table 4.2). The lowest refusal rates were for the provision of ‘access ramps’ (13 per cent), followed by ‘adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access’ (15 per cent) and the provision of a ‘through-floor lift / stairlift’ (17 per cent). Refusal rates were somewhat higher for the provision of an ‘accessible shower’ (23 per cent), the provision of ‘downstairs toilet facilities’ (22 per cent) and the construction of an ‘extension’ (20 per cent). However, it is important to note that the refusal rate for the HAG Scheme offers less insight into local authority schemes of prioritisation than is the case for the HOP Scheme. Prioritisation is generally based on an assessment of the applicant’s needs rather than the type of adaptation to be funded.

Table 4.2 Refusal rates under the HAG Scheme

	Included in Application (number)	Approved for Grant (number)	Refusal Rate (%)
Accessible shower	211	162	23.2
Downstairs toilet facilities	91	71	22.0
Through-floor lift / stairlift	60	50	16.7
Adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access	52	44	15.4
Access ramp(s)	45	39	13.3
Extension	41	33	19.5
Other	50	38	24.0

MAG Scheme: Under the MAG Scheme, by far the most popular category of adaptation was the provision of a ‘level access shower’, which was included in almost all applications (85 per cent) under the scheme and had a high approval rate (79 per cent). This was followed by the installation of ‘grab-rails’, which were included and approved in half of applications, and the installation of a ‘stairlift’, which was included in one-quarter of applications and 22 per cent of approvals.

Figure 4.5 Categories of works sought and approved under the MAG Scheme, number



In common with the HAG Scheme, refusal rates under the MAG Scheme were generally quite low. No applications for grab-rails were reported refused, while just 6 per cent of applications for level access showers and 13 per cent of applications for stairlifts were reported refused (Table 4.3).

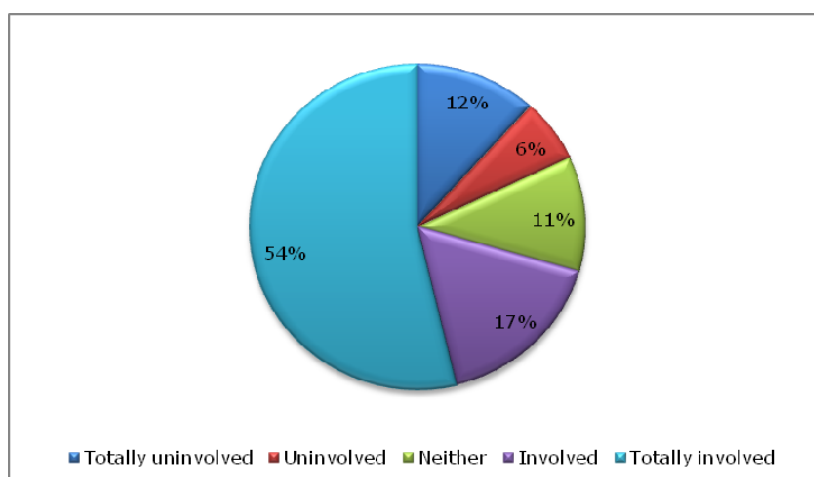
Table 4.3 Refusal rates under the MAG Scheme

	Included in Application (number)	Approved for Grant (number)	Refusal Rate %
Level access shower	49	46	6.1
Grab-rails	29	29	0.0
Stairlift	15	13	13.3
Access ramp(s)	4	3	25.0
Other	9	10	-11.1

4.4 Successful Applicants Experiences

As Figure 4.6 below shows, most successful applicants (71 per cent) who responded to the survey said they were either ‘totally involved’ or ‘very involved’ in decision-making in relation to the type of alterations to be made to their home. Just 18 per cent felt ‘uninvolved’ or ‘totally uninvolved’ in decision-making.

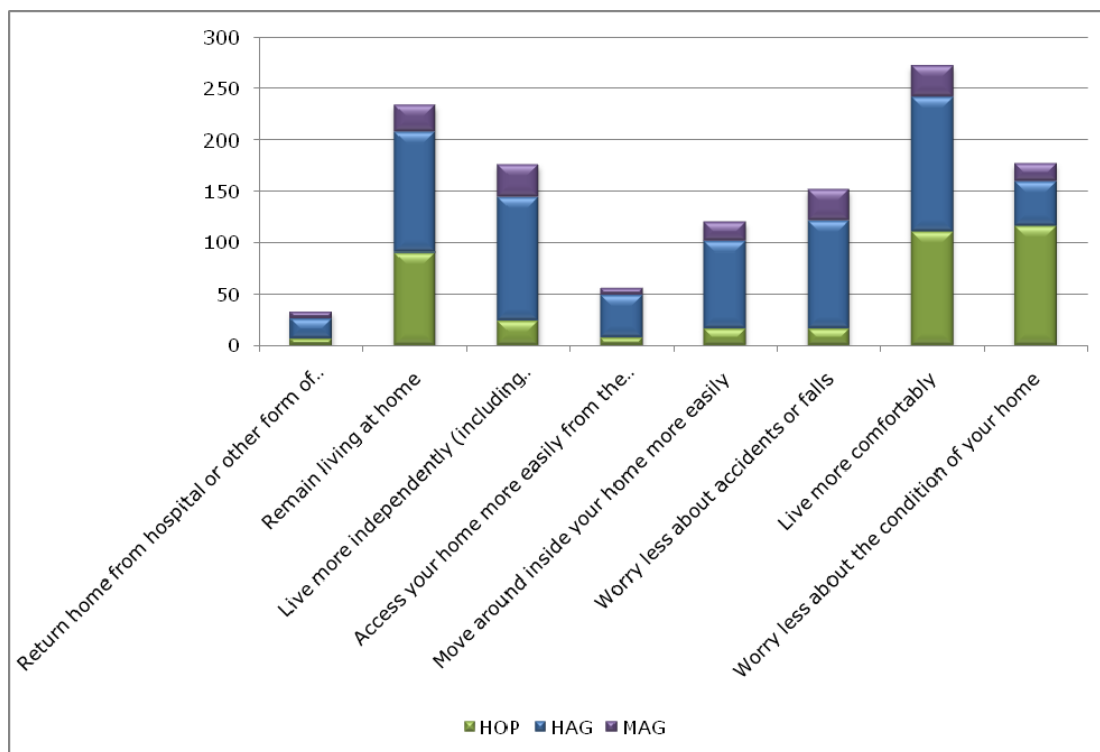
Figure 4.6 Feeling of involvement in decision-making, percentage



Two-thirds (66 per cent) of the successful applicants who responded to the survey reported that the alterations had enabled them to live more comfortably, while the alterations had enabled over half (56 per cent) to remain living in their own homes,

43 per cent to live more independently (including personal care) and 43 per cent to worry less about the condition of their home (Figure 4.7). Only 8 per cent of successful applicants reported that their adaptations had enabled them to ‘return home from hospital or other form of care’, which is an explicit aim of the schemes. One possibility is that the timescale of development may contribute to preventing the schemes from playing a greater role in this regard.

Figure 4.7 Impact of the alterations on successful applicants’ lives, number



As Table 4.4 shows, grants awarded under the HOP Scheme ranged from €780 to €10,500, with an average grant of €6,429. The total cost of the works funded under this scheme varied considerably, ranging from €1,000 to €75,000, with average expenditure of €10,844. Thus, some applicants had to fund a sizeable shortfall.

Table 4.4 Grant funding received and total expenditure by successful applicants, euro

	Minimum Grant	Maximum Grant ⁵	Average Grant	Minimum Expenditure	Maximum Expenditure	Average Expenditure
HOP	€780	€10,500	€6,429	€1,000	€75,000	€10,844
HAG	€1,000	€30,000	€12,865	€11,000	€150,000	€18,974
MAG	€1,703	€6,000	€5,012	€1,703	€25,000	€7,476

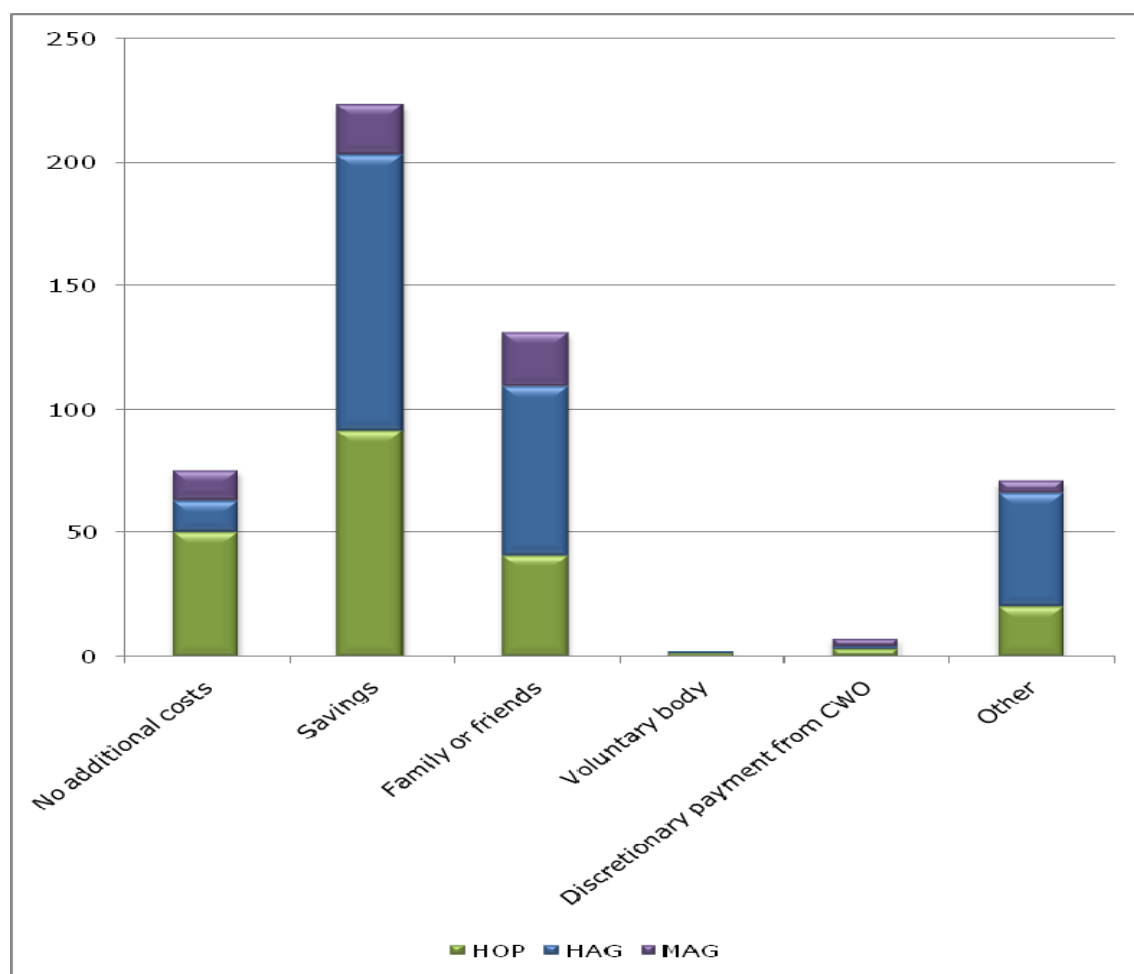
Under the HAG Scheme, the grants awarded varied substantially, ranging from €1,000 to €30,000, with an average grant of €12,865. This scheme accounted for both the largest grants and the highest total costs of adaptation works, with total expenditure ranging from €11,000 to €150,000 and average expenditure of €18,974. Again, some applicants had to fund a large shortfall from their own funds.

Grants awarded under the MAG Scheme were the smallest, ranging from €1,703 to €6,000, with an average grant of €5,012. However, total expenditure on works funded under this scheme ranged from €1,703 to the surprisingly high maximum of €25,000, with average expenditure of €7,476. Again, applicants often had to fund a shortfall.

The grant awarded covered all of the costs of the proposed works in a little under one-fifth (18 per cent) of cases. As Figure 4.8 shows, the majority financed the additional expenditure require from their savings (53 per cent), family or friends (31 per cent) or a loan from the bank or Credit Union (18 per cent). Discretionary payments from the Community Welfare Officer or financial help from voluntary bodies (such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul), played a negligible role in funding any shortfalls.

⁵ In a small number of cases, respondents reported receiving more than the maximum grant available. As the survey was anonymous, it was not possible to verify these figures with the respondents, so their figures were adjusted down to the maximum grant level for the relevant scheme.

Figure 4.8 Meeting funding shortfalls, number

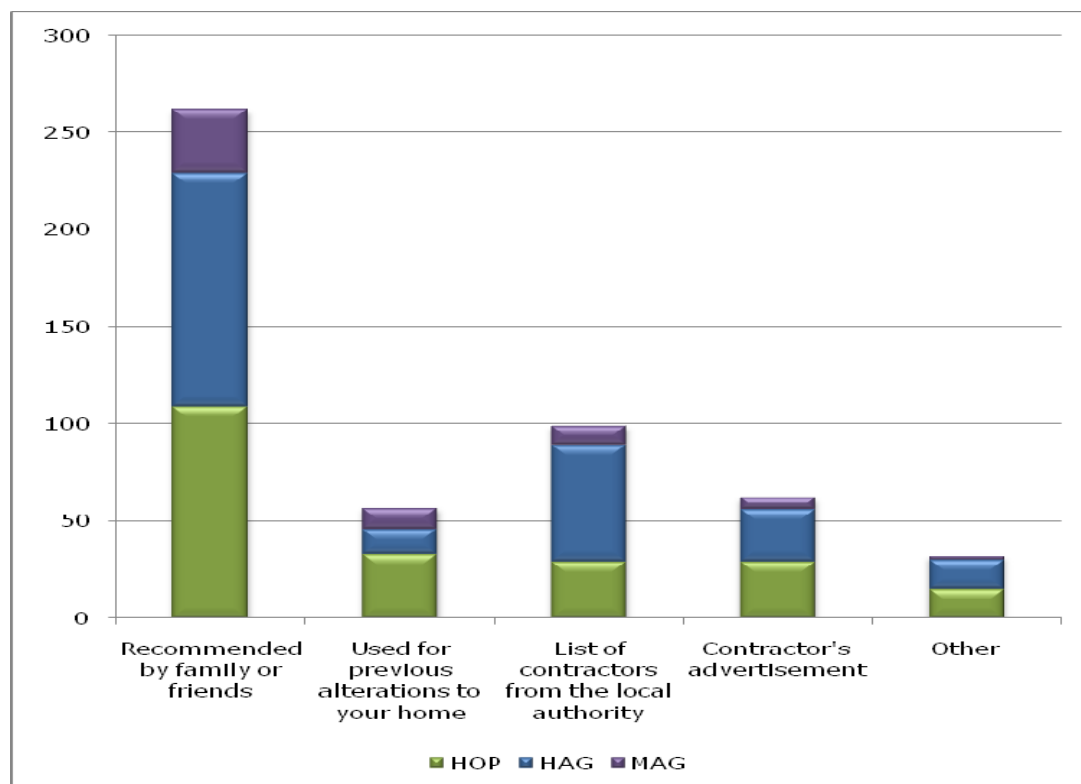


The majority of successful applicants (87 per cent) reported that they did not experience any difficulties in finding building contractors to give quotes for the work, while the remaining 13 per cent did have problems. This may be attributed to the current economic situation, as interviewees and focus group participants from representative organisations made it clear that this had been an issue in recent years.

Figure 4.9 shows that, in more than half of all cases (58 per cent) the most common way of selecting a contractor to undertake grant-funded works was to get recommendations from family or friends. Interestingly, within the context of the relatively low numbers of local authorities which maintain panels of contractors, using a list of contractors from the local authority was recorded as the next most common way of selecting a contractor (22 per cent). Contractor’s advertisements (14 per cent)

and using contractors used for previous jobs (13 per cent) played a less important role.

Figure 4.9 Choosing a building contractor, number



The vast majority of successful applicants (95 per cent) reported that the works had been completed to their satisfaction, with just 5 per cent reporting that they were not happy with the completed works.

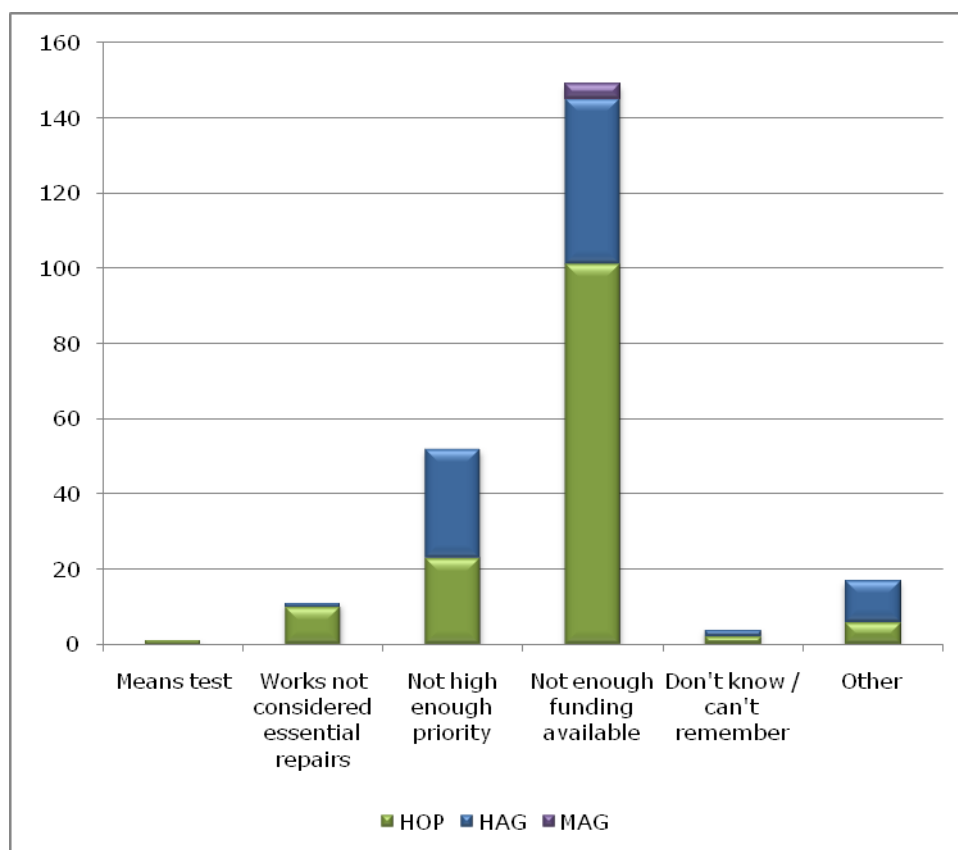
When asked, two-thirds of successful applicants (67 per cent) did not plan to apply for another housing adaptation grant, although 33 per cent did foresee a need for further alterations.

4.5 Unsuccessful Applicants

As detailed in Section 1 above, 28 per cent of those who returned the applicant survey indicated that their application had been refused and a further 2 per cent said it was only partially approved. When asked what reasons were given for refusal, three-quarters (78 per cent) of these respondents reported that the reason given was 'not enough funding available'. A further 27 per cent reported that their application

had been refused because they were ‘not high enough priority’ – see Figure 4.10. This could be considered a function of funding being inadequate to demand, which has necessitated the introduction of a system of prioritising eligible applicants for payment.

Figure 4.10 Reasons for refusal, number



The majority (73 per cent) of the survey respondents whose grant applications had been refused did not appeal against the local authority’s decision, while the remaining 27 per cent did lodge an appeal with the local authority. Only three respondents (2 per cent) had gone a step further and appealed to the Ombudsman. In the majority of cases (81 per cent), the outcome of an appeal was that the local authority’s original decision was upheld and the grant refused. The original decision was overturned and the grant awarded in just 5 per cent of cases, the remaining cases were ongoing (see also Section 3.13 above).

Box 4 Summary of Issues from Applicants' Survey

- The majority of applicants said they did not find the application process onerous, with 51 per cent rating it as either easy or very easy. However, a sizeable minority (28 per cent) did experience difficulties.
- The majority of successful applicants (71 per cent) felt either totally involved or very involved in decision-making in relation to the type of alterations to be made to their home.
- Adaptations had an important impact on the lives of successful applicants, enabling 66 per cent to live more comfortably, 56 per cent to remain living in their own homes, 43 per cent to live more independently and 43 per cent to worry less about the condition of their home. However, only 8 per cent reported that adaptations had enabled them to return home from hospital or other form of care, which is an explicit aim of the schemes.
- The grant covered all costs in the case of just 18 per cent of the successful applicants surveyed. The remainder had to finance a shortfall in funding. The majority funded the shortfall through their savings (53 per cent), family or friends (31 per cent) or a loan (18 per cent). Assistance from voluntary bodies or the Community Welfare Officer was negligible.
- The vast majority of successful applicants (95 per cent) reported that the adaptation works had been completed to their satisfaction.
- The main reason given for refusing an application was 'not enough funding available' (78 per cent), followed by the related reason of 'not high enough priority' (27 per cent).
- Just over one-quarter (27 per cent) of unsuccessful applicants lodged an appeal with the local authority, in most cases (81 per cent) the original decision was upheld and in 5 per cent of cases the original decision overturned and a grant awarded.

5. Interviews and focus groups with representative organisations

5.1 Introduction

To gather more qualitative information on the operation of the housing adaptation grant schemes at a national level, seven interviews and two focus groups were undertaken with organisations representing and/or providing services for older people and people with a disability (see Section 1 for further details). The results of these interviews and focus groups are discussed below.

5.2 Overall Impact of Scheme

Respondents from representative organisations concurred that the housing adaptation grant schemes has had a very positive impact on the lives of successful applicants, together with their families and carers, by making their homes more usable.

Several respondents highlighted the enabling of older people and people with a disability to remain living in their own homes or to return home from hospital as a positive aspect of the scheme. The economic benefits of enabling people to live as independently as possible were also highlighted:

The scheme enables people to stay living at home, instead of going into hospital, which is where they want to stay. It's saving money in the long term and keeping people out of institutions.

It was argued that alternative options to housing adaptation can be bleak, including living at home in unacceptable living conditions without basic facilities or institutional care:

Other options can be an indefinite stay in hospital or discharge to live in a nursing home...Without access to housing adaptations, some people continue to live in circumstances that are not acceptable, such as living in the living room, using a commode and washing in a basin. Moving house can be an option but this requires both personal and financial resources which may not always be there.

5.3 Application process

When considering the application process, it is important to note that adaptations are often undertaken in a crisis situation, when applicants and their families are under a lot of pressure and may have a reduced ability to cope with bureaucracy:

The decision to adapt is often made in a crisis situation, with the acquisition of an injury or the onset of a medical condition. Both the individual and their family are in crisis and under great emotional and pressure and there is also often pressure to get out of hospital.

Respondents highlighted the importance of the local authority staff responsible for administering the grant schemes adopting a supportive attitude towards applicants and their families, which may not always be the case:

One of our children...is seven and a half years old...Her mother applied for an adaptation grant and she was very traumatised over it and ended up crying. They just don't understand what life is like with a severely handicapped child. The guy in [X local authority] eventually said he was really sorry.

Furthermore, not all applicants for housing adaptation grants have the ability to negotiate each stage of the application process without assistance. Respondents from representative organisations cited examples of applicants who needed assistance dealing with the financial aspects of the schemes and dealing with written communications. In both of these examples, the relevant local authorities did not seem to have systems in place to respond to these applicants' specific needs, forcing the applicants to seek the assistance required elsewhere:

...the capacity of people to operate the system can be very limited. We had a case where the person didn't have the capacity to pay the bills. The housing association that he's renting from finally took it on. I [an advocate] took the application and the OT did a lot. If he could just get in and out of his flat, a lot of his social and behavioural problems would go.

Literacy is a massive area. People might get assistance putting the form in but all communication by the local authorities is by letter. One Council particularly is a nightmare to deal with. They don't understand that people might need to speak on the phone and ask questions and that they might have trouble getting together the additional information. I [an advocate] have one case where the Council refused to deal with the person in any form other than writing. Both the brother and sister involved had very limited literacy and couldn't write. Their file was closed because the people didn't supply the information requested because they didn't understand the letter. I wrote-off a stinker and had it re-opened. A lot of the people applying for the grants are very disadvantaged and very vulnerable. The local authorities are ok for providing information in different formats and providing it online but there's nothing beyond that. Very few local authorities will meet people to go through it with them and explain.

It was argued that the role adopted by the local authorities has tended to be overly bureaucratic:

...they [the local authorities] seem to see their role as giving out the application forms, processing the application forms and signing notes. Overall, they seem very bureaucratic and focused on following procedure.

However, there seemed to be a feeling that local authority procedures were not always made clear to the applicants:

There should be clear steps. Part of that should be a visit, an acknowledgement letter that the local authority has received the application forms - an extended letter explaining the situation.

There was a broad consensus that many local authorities are failing to provide a supportive service, which can respond to applicants' individual needs. In addition to major delays and backlogs of applications in many local authority areas, the level of paperwork required can be daunting and administrative errors can cause delays and stress:

If assistance is provided, it shouldn't be difficult to receive that assistance. At the moment, the local authorities start on the basis that 'You don't really need it' so you need to prove your need to them. They put you through a very long line of difficult paperwork. Applicants often have difficulties with it; for instance they may have a newly acquired disability.

I know of one case where the local authority lost the forms three times and they had to re-submit each time.

In this context, there was concern that people without family or other support people may not hear about the housing adaptation grant schemes or be able to access help with the application process:

Also, it's generally a son or daughter that goes through the process for them - some family member. So, people in very dire straits are often the ones without family or whose family is not in contact. These people are the ones who are also not aware of entitlements and benefits.

One respondent argued that the changeover from the old Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme run by the HSE to the new HOP Scheme run by the local authorities resulted in a lot of confusion and misinformation, while the loss of an important link with public health nurses as the primary source of referrals is a longer-term concern:

There has been a lot of confusion about the changeover. The local authorities and the local health offices didn't know what was going on and were giving out wrong information. There is anecdotal evidence, from PQs, that local health offices have been saying that the scheme was finished. Total confusion!.

Under the old Special Housing Aid for the Elderly Scheme, 70 per cent of referrals came from the district health nurse. People weren't generally aware of the grant scheme and they were referred. How do you move from the HSE as the provider of both services to one where services are provided by two separate organisations?

A lack of involvement of social workers in the housing adaptation grant process was also commented on and it was argued that this gap is being filled by OTs and advocates but that this is not really their role:

There's very little social work but there's a huge need for it...I end up doing things that are part of a social work role, not an advocacy role. They should be helping people to put things together for applications.

Suggestions for improving the applications process from representative organisations included advertising the scheme more widely through user-friendly leaflets, one-stop shops in every local authority and having a specific contact person in every local authority that is available and helpful:

There should be a clearly identified person looking after the schemes in every local authority so when the switch is phoned, they say 'That's Sean' and Sean is available and helpful and says 'Come in and I'll help you to fill-in the form and here's who to ring for quotes'.

Introduce a one-stop shop for the schemes in every local authority and advertise and promote it...it takes quite a while to get visibility. You might think, if it's been on the radio or TV once or twice, that everyone knows about it but they don't, it's incremental.

5.4 Means Testing

Several representative organisations expressed the view that the introduction of a means test on a national basis for the first time was a regressive step, representing a retrenchment from the previous rights-based approach. It was argued that access should be rights-based because housing adaptations are a necessity and a cost of having a disability:

The IWA's [Irish Wheelchair Association's] official position is that housing adaptation is a necessity and a right. The IWA has always argued that there should be no cap on the grant. Housing adaptations are not of the applicant's own choosing. They are a necessity, a cost of having or acquiring a disability. So, the IWA argues for 100 per cent funding. This hasn't changed but the IWA has reluctantly accepted the introduction of a means test.

Two organisations representing older people expressed the view that the means test is an equitable way of distributing resources. However, it was felt that there is a danger that older people may opt to save their money and live in sub-standard conditions:

Yes [the means test is a fair way of distributing resources], but it could exclude certain people. Any service should be based on need as opposed to means. People could have plenty of money but not spend it. Older people won't spend their money because the mentality is that they leave it. In some ways means testing is fair but it will result in less people having their homes adapted.

There was a broad consensus among the representative organisations that the introduction of means testing has been detrimental to many applicants and potential applicants. Issues identified in relation to the operation of the means test included the creation of a poverty trap for people with a disability, failure to take into account the additional costs of having a disability, insufficient flexibility to cater for applicants whose income has changed or will change substantially as a result of their disability, failure to take into account mortgage payments, failure to support young adults wishing to continue living in the family home and difficulties with the administration of the means test relating to intrusiveness and difficulties gathering the requisite information. These issues are discussed below in more detail.

The contribution of the housing adaptation grant schemes to the creation of a poverty trap for people with disabilities, whereby the loss of benefits creates a financial disincentive to employment, was identified as an issue by some representative organisations:

I know of a Mum of a child who needs a downstairs extension to provide a bedroom and bathroom. She had left work to look after the child but recently went back to work to help to pay for the extension. But, now she doesn't qualify for the full grant so she is financially worse off. It's a poverty trap.

Several respondents highlighted the additional expenses associated with a member of the household having a disability and argued that the means test should take these costs into account:

I don't think the cost of disability is taken into account. If you add the extra costs of transport, clothing, heating, laundry and so on, they aren't met by the benefits that are being paid at the moment. The cost of disability should be taken into account...I have...[a] client who pays €70 to €80 per week on parking to attend hospital appointments with her husband and they have four kids under seven. All sorts of extra costs are involved.

As means are assessed on the basis of the applicant and any spouse/partner's evidence of income for the previous year, it was argued that the means test is not sufficiently flexible to cater for applicants whose income has changed or will change substantially as a result of their disability. For instance, if the applicant's income has decreased, following the sudden onset of a condition or an acquired injury, the applicant would have to delay for a year before applying for a housing adaptation grant, in order to provide the requisite evidence of income:

One of our families got really badly caught. They have a three and a half year old boy with an acquired brain injury and he has been nine months in hospital. One parent gave up work to look after him because he has significant disabilities. It's downstairs accommodation that they need for him. They would have qualified for a partial grant but they were means-tested on last year's salaries. To qualify for a grant, they would have to wait until next year and re-apply with this year's single salary. They sent in letters from TDs and Jack & Jill but it made no difference. They wanted to get the renovations done before the child was discharged from hospital so he wouldn't be coming home to a building site.

Similarly, the means test is not sufficiently flexible to cater for people with progressive conditions in a timely fashion. Applicants with progressive conditions who are currently working may be unable to satisfy the means test until they are obliged to stop working. However, borrowing to cover the cost of adaptations is impossible, as future earnings potential would be too low to service a loan:

There is an issue about future earnings; how can you predict whether someone will have to give up work? The means test doesn't take account of the fact that, with a progressive disease like MS, you may have to leave work and won't be able to pay back a huge loan.

The means test does not take into account mortgage payments. It was argued that an older person with no dependents who owns their house outright and has an income of, say, €50,000 p.a. could be considered quite well-off, while a younger person with dependents and a mortgage earning €50,000 p.a. will have little disposable income left over after mortgage payments. Furthermore, in the case of parents of a child with a disability, it is likely that one of the parents may have had to leave work to care for the child, while their mortgage was probably borrowed on the basis of two incomes:

Older people with an income of €65,000 p.a. - that's huge because their mortgage is paid. But it should be a much higher limit for parents with disabled kids, who have a big mortgage and no medical card.

Most mortgages are based on two people in the family working. If you then have a severely handicapped child, you're immediately down a salary.

One respondent raised the issue of young adults who wish to continue living in their family home, who were being means tested on the basis of their parents' income. It was felt that this was inequitable because the parents may opt not to fund the adaptations:

There is the issue of means-testing. I would be all for people who are young adults using the schemes with their families but it should be their income that is assessed. The fact that it is Mum and Dad's income that is taken into account should not really be a reason for refusal. Families are very concerned that their income is taken into account. I recently had a case where it was the reason for refusal.

Finally, the administration of the means test was seen as problematic by several representative organisations. It was argued that some applicants can find the means testing process very intrusive, some find it very stressful, while others may have difficulty in gathering the requisite financial information from the Revenue Commissioners:

The means test is a massive intrusion on people...

...people don't like people rifling through their private information. There are a lot of privacy issues with older people, more so than younger generations.

There's no appreciation of the amount of applying and negotiating that our parents have to do on behalf of their sick child. There's Carer's Benefit, Carer's Allowance, the Medical Card and the Domiciliary Allowance of €300 per month. Domiciliary Allowance is the only non-means-tested payment for children that need care above and beyond a normal child but they don't all get it, it has to be extraordinary. All the rest are means-tested. There's no appreciation of the amount of stress and difficulty involved.

Tax clearance can be an issue for applicants. If they're retired on a state pension or they're getting a private pension, they may be paying tax at source and they may not have a tax clearance statement or know where to go for it.

Respondent organisations argued that substantial numbers of potential applicants are deterred from applying for a housing adaptation grant by the means test. These potential applicants may represent a substantial pool of possibly unmet need, which

will not be reflected in the refusal rate. They felt that the options for many of the people who are refused or do not apply for a grant can be bleak, including going ahead with the adaptations and incurring large debts and managing without adaptations and living in sub-standard conditions:

If somebody does not qualify for grant-aid, they may decide not go ahead with the adaptations or they may go ahead and put themselves under considerable financial pressure. Even under the old scheme, a lot of people ended up with an extra-big mortgage. It can cost up to €70,000 or €80,000 for a big extension and grant-aid would only cover a certain amount. Families are now having to fund the entire amount.

Now you have people who can't afford to do the adaptations living 24-hours a day in one room with a basin of water and a commode. Then they get depressed and their marriage breaks up.

Recognising that the means test is unlikely to be removed, there was a broad consensus among the representative organisations that the threshold should be increased before the sliding scale of grant aid begins:

The IWA reluctantly accepts that a means test has been introduced. However, it should start at a higher threshold of say €50,000 before the sliding scale starts. Below this threshold, there should be 100 per cent payment. Many people with disabilities are on social welfare or low incomes. It is unreasonable to expect them to fund the balance of the cost. People with an acquired disability may have just transferred onto welfare. Depending on the type of disability, people with a disability may not be able to get insurance to take out an increased mortgage.

There has to be a means test but it should be based on what they're paying out, like a mortgage. Most of our families didn't get the Carer's Allowance but at least they did take into account mileage for appointments, mortgage relief and so on. I think it should be means-tested but it should just exclude the wealthy; anything below say €100,000 or €120,000 p.a. should qualify – that would be a proper means test... If they did a fair means test, a lot more people would get something towards it; even if it's not huge money.

Finally, it was suggested that people who are ineligible for a housing adaptation grant because they do not satisfy the means test should be able to claim tax relief on housing adaptation works as a medical expense:

Not only are people earning over €30,000 not eligible for full grant aid while people earning over €65,000 aren't eligible for any grant aid, they can't claim a tax rebate as Revenue guidelines specifically exclude housing adaptations. They can't get grant aid but they still can't claim tax relief. If you're excluded from the grant scheme, you should be able to claim tax relief on housing adaptations as a medical expense.

5.5 System of Prioritisation

Most of the representative organisations did not consider the systems of prioritisation operated by the local authorities to be equitable and transparent. It was argued that the manner in which a case for a particular applicant is presented can unfairly affect their level of prioritisation and the outcome of their application:

How does the individual give the information is a concern. Some people are better able to present their case to meet the Council's requirements. The hospital specialist and the doctor [GP] have to promote the person to get the funding and some do this better than others.

I do think that people who can put forward a good case, who can put it together on paper, do better.

One respondent also felt that the local authority staff dealing with the application could have an impact on the outcome:

We don't have enough cases applying for the grant to compare. But, it seems to depend on the person they meet; it depends on the Council person.

Several respondents raised concerns regarding the inclusion of people with a terminal illness within the Priority 1 category of the DEHLG system of prioritisation. It was argued that adaptations are often not the best option for people with a terminal illness, due to the timescale and disruption. Concerns were also raised regarding the prioritisation of people with progressive conditions. It was argued that people with progressive conditions may not be prioritised at an early enough stage:

If it is a progressive disability, it is better if the adaptations can be done early rather than later but they may not be considered a priority.

Furthermore, it is important to address the longer-term needs of those with progressive conditions, such as multiple sclerosis. It was argued that the local authority should be encouraging applicants and OTs to look at the longer term, even though it may be more expensive initially, because it will avoid wasting resources on adaptations that are only suitable for a short time:

Experience from the previous schemes showed that, where a condition is progressive like MS, the applicant's needs now may be totally different to their needs in ten years' time. Both applicants and the people doing the assessments find it very difficult to address long-term needs. It's easier to look at putting in an under-stairs loo than bigger adaptations because the applicant doesn't want to think about being confined to a wheelchair and the people doing the assessment don't have the funding.

One respondent argued that there is an important distinction between priorities and emergencies and this should be built into the housing adaptation grant system:

Priorities and emergencies need to be distinguished...If an older person's boiler has broken down, fixing the heating can't wait for three or four months in the winter. It's an emergency. It's unfair that, if they went ahead and got it fixed and then looked for funding, they would not qualify. It's this issue of emergency versus priority.

Finally, concerns were expressed regarding who is responsible for designating a priority level for each applicant. It was suggested that the DEHLG should provide guidance for local authorities on this issue:

The IWA would prefer to have no prioritisation but if there must be prioritisation, it would like guidance for the local authorities on how to prioritise and who should make the decision.

5.6 OT Assessments

In relation to accessing an assessment by an OT, several representative organisations highlighted inconsistencies, both between local authority areas and between public and private clients within the same area. Some local authorities always require an OT assessment, while others do not:

There is inconsistency regarding the use of OTs, some local authorities always use them, some only use them if a large suite of works is planned and others never use them.

It was reported that it can take several months to one year, even up to six years in one area, to get an appointment to see a HSE OT, while the wait for a private OT is much shorter, at about six weeks:

In relation to OT waiting lists, there are huge geographical inequalities. It all depends on where you live. If an OT comes out privately, it only takes six weeks. With HSE OTs, in some cases, you can't get on a waiting list anywhere.

Just for an OT assessment, you can be waiting a year. I know people who have had an OT come out privately and it only takes six weeks. In one or two years, the person might not be around anymore. If somebody badly needs something done, it needs to be much quicker.

The waiting list for the HSE OT is four to six years. It's not reasonable. It's next to impossible for some people to get a grant, under these circumstances. If you're 84 years of age, you may die before you get an assessment...The HSE doesn't have the number of OTs needed. They said there were nine OTs needed in [X area] and they only got something like three.

It was argued that the current system in some areas, whereby some local authorities will accept an OT report from either a community OT or a private OT, gives better-off applicants an unfair advantage:

People who are well-off can get organised and see a private OT but the unfortunate are left behind.

In other local authority areas, applicants are not given any choice of OT and must accept the public or private OT to whom they are referred. One respondent raised a concern regarding the applicant's lack of choice of an OT in these areas and the lack of a route to appeal the OT's recommendations. It was argued that OTs can differ in their professional opinions and that some may have more of a focus on independent living than others:

...there are concerns regarding what's the standard of the OT and the same could be said of the HSE OTs. Because everything hinges on the OT report. If they say that you don't need something, where do you go with that? I went to the Ombudsman under the old DPG scheme. My client went to a private OT because the local authority said he would be waiting a long time. Then, a year later, the Council changed its mind and sent in the HSE OT, who wrote a report not in favour of the applicant and the Council took that one... What if an OT has written something that the client doesn't like? They might not be focused on independent living; they can be very medically oriented. How do you appeal that, if you're not happy with the practice of the OT?

This respondent felt that additional training in housing adaptations should be available to OTs and that local authorities should afford applicants more choice in selecting an OT:

OTs should be registered and the local authorities should let them choose, rather than being sent. Maybe an additional certificate in housing for OTs could be introduced.

Similarly, an organisation providing services for children with serious developmental disabilities reported that children are often referred to an adult community OT for assessment and felt that it would be better if the local authority would accept a report from the child's own paediatric OT:

The OTs doing the assessments don't know anything about the child. It would make more sense to have the child's own OT do the assessment. We would have concerns about the experience and qualifications of the people assessing. They're usually adult OTs, not even child OTs.

...the OT who came to do the assessment wanted to know if they couldn't carry the child upstairs! She was eight years old and far too tall. It would have been a total health and safety risk.

With regard to the €200 contribution towards the cost of a private OT assessment which local authorities can recoup from the DEHLG under the new grant schemes, one representative organisation felt that this level of funding was insufficient as some applicants may require more than one visit:

...there is a limit on the amount that can be recouped of around €200. This is not quite realistic because you probably need a second and even a third visit from the OT. €200 allows for the initial assessment of need for the application but there should also be a second visit while the work is on-going, to ensure that everything that was discussed is being put in place, and again on completion. The allowance could be doubled to allow for another two visits, as OTs are best placed to advise on making the best use of space and making sure that the grant money is put to the best use in both the immediate future and long-term. OTs provide a holistic service, as they often make follow-up phone calls at no extra charge. It may be helpful on the third visit to help the

person with a disability and their carers to get used to using any new equipment, such as hoists.

Echoing a concern raised by the OTs who participated in the focus groups, one representative organisation argued that Part M of the *Building Regulations* is out-of-date and that the local authorities can be overly reliant on such minimum standards, which may not be appropriate to the applicant's needs in every case. Furthermore, it was argued that the local authorities, and the OTs whom they engage, should respect applicants' wishes to live as independently as possible:

...in relation to Part M, there is a huge need for the Building Regulations to be revised. The chairs and assistive technology can do a lot more and are so much bigger now.

People with disabilities don't stay ten years old forever and also don't want to do something with assistance forever. They want to go to the toilet and shower themselves...It should be recognised that people may need further adaptations, in order to use the facilities independently. They need to respect dignity and respect issues, rather than stick to measurements. The fact that someone wants to do something on their own should be recognised.

Again echoing concerns raised by the OTs, one respondent expressed concern regarding a lack of co-ordination between the housing adaptation grants provided by the local authorities and the home care supports provided by the HSE (see Section 6.4 below). It was argued that, even once a house has been adapted, it may be impossible to get a home care package to enable the person to live at home:

The Council may be saying that a house is accessible but then we can't get the care packages to go with it.

5.7 Funding of the Schemes

Insufficient funding to meet demand under the housing adaptation grant schemes was clearly a major cause of concern for representative organisations. Several related problems were highlighted, including many local authorities having suspended the schemes, many local authorities only paying grants to 'priority 1' applicants and large backlogs of applicants waiting to adapt their homes on long waiting lists in many local authority areas:

The primary problem is funding. They never did a survey of need before they initiated the schemes and that's a major flaw because they never funded it sufficiently. There's the problem of roll-over; the local authorities gave out all the money last year and now there's no money for new applicants and they have to go on a waiting list. Then, if you are an emergency, you may have to go on a waiting list as well.

It varies between Councils. Quite a few are building-up a backlog of applications and a couple are not taking applications at all. For instance, [X local authority] stopped taking applications last August and it is still not open again. Others have approved applications in principle but there is a backlog and they're not paying the grants until they receive the next round of funding in March. Even then, some have prioritised and only Priority 1 applications will actually get paid their grant.

Assessment and agreement should be within three months. I know of a lift that took a full year to get.

As a consequence of these delays and backlogs, it appears that the schemes are failing to meet the needs of people requiring adaptations in order to return home from hospital:

Under the new grant schemes, there is supposed to be fast-tracking if people need adaptations to come home from hospital or if it's an emergency. Not sure this is happening if Councils don't have the money to pay grants and there's a backlog of people waiting for payment.

In this context, the lack of an option to go ahead with urgent adaptations and claim the grant at a later date was identified as a flaw of the schemes:

If you need the adaptations urgently, you can't have them done and claim it back.

There was a broad consensus among the representative organisations that participated in the research that the inadequate funding of the schemes has resulted in several geographical inconsistencies in the implementation of the housing adaptation grant schemes. These inconsistencies include the level of funding allocated to each local authority, access to the grant schemes, as they have been suspended at different times by different local authorities, and the length of time applicants must spend on a waiting list:

It still is a post-code or local authority lottery. Funding is allocated differently in different counties, based on perceived need rather than assessed need. The Department of the Environment gives an allocation to each Council based on what it thinks it might need. Some Councils are managing with that and some are not. Some are spent-up more quickly than others.

There's a big problem with geographical inequality. It varies hugely depending in the area you live in, especially the length of time you wait to get a grant... In bigger cities, the waiting lists are longer and it all depends on where you live. I've heard of cases where people were on waiting lists and it took two years to have a shower put in.

Within the context of the inadequate funding of the housing adaptation grant schemes, some respondent organisations suggested that a proportion of the funding available should be ring-fenced for emergencies and also for smaller contract-cleaning jobs which may be required to enable people to return home from hospital:

There are situations where some local authorities have spent all their money for the year. They should ring-fence some for emergencies so, if something comes up afterwards, they can fund it.

Part of the funding should be ring-fenced for overall and mask types of work that will enable people to come home from hospital, like fumigating a house, throwing away old filthy carpets, throwing out rubbish that has accumulated. Quite a lot of that was done under the old scheme. There should be ring-fenced funding and a service-level agreement. It was done in part by groups like ALONE, funded under Special Housing Aid for the Elderly.

5.8 Funding Limits

There was broad agreement among the representative organisations that the maximum funding limits available under the grant schemes are often inadequate to cover costs, particularly for larger works such as extensions and for expensive assistive technologies (this view was supported by the applicants' survey, see Section 4.4). Consequently, in order to go ahead with the adaptations, applicants must raise the money to meet a large shortfall in funding or reduce the scale of the adaptations proposed:

€30,000 [the funding limit under the HAG Scheme] is not adequate. It's ok for small works. For example, for a bathroom, kitchen and stairlift, it's adequate to meet 95 per cent of the costs. But, for bigger adaptations, which is generally what wheelchair users need, the applicant has to take on 50-60 per cent of the total cost, because it costs way over the €30,000 grant.

You get €12,500 towards installing a through-floor lift but the actual cost is €28,000. Building costs are coming down but they're so high that there's no way that the grant would meet one-fifth of the cost...It can cost €70,000 / €80,000 / €100,000 to build on a room with an accessible room for a bathroom, physiotherapy room or storeroom or whatever it is that they need.

However, not all of the respondents agreed that the funding limits are inadequate, with one respondent arguing:

I don't think so because the builder knows what they'll be allowed so they're not going to quote a price that's not covered by the grant. The schemes are their bread and butter so that's not going to make much sense.

One respondent argued that the increase in the funding limits under the new housing adaptation grant schemes have not had a positive impact for many applicants, due to the introduction of the means test with a sliding scale of grant aid available for those earning over €30,000:

For the vast majority of people, the grant is not any higher because only people earning less than €30,000 qualify.

While the HOP and MAG Schemes provide 100 per cent of the total cost of the works, subject to maximum funding limits, the HAG Scheme only provides 95 per cent of the total cost, subject to a maximum funding limit. There was broad agreement that raising the 5 per cent shortfall under this scheme can create difficulties for many applicants. Formerly, community welfare officers were able to make discretionary payments in some cases but this no longer seems available:

The HSE top-up grant is now gone...The HSE grant often used to get people through and that's not happening any more.

In some cases, applicants relied on charity:

The balance is usually begged or borrowed. Previously, under the old scheme, people would go to the health board to get a top-up grant, typically €7,000. However, I'm unsure whether they still do this. After that, they would go to charities. There's St. Vincent de Paul and a couple of other charitable institutions in Dublin, which may contribute around €5,000 each. People are trying to make-up a balance of €30,000 to €40,000 from all of these organisations but there are very few people have the stamina to go through that. Some of the disability associations with a smaller, more limited membership also provide financial support to their members to do adaptations.

In other cases, where applicants have sufficient means, they can borrow the shortfall. However, there was a concern that applicants may over-stretch their resources and incur serious debt, particularly if they have a large mortgage:

It strikes me that the grants are only suitable if, like me for example, you bought the house years ago and you don't have a huge mortgage. But, young people buying more recently probably couldn't really afford the house in the first place, much less re-mortgage. The mindset is that only older people are disabled. The Department is thinking of retired civil servants like themselves, not a thirty-year-old who acquires a disability, with a child and another on the way.

One of the organisations interviewed followed-up more recently to report that members were now finding it increasing difficult to access bank loans:

... recently it is becoming increasingly difficult, given the present banking situation, for people who have Adaptation Grant approval to get a loan to make up the balance of the cost. In a recent situation the client has €30,000.00 grant approval from X Council, but the Building Society and Bank having previously indicated that a loan would be possible (balance of €26,000 to be made up) now say this loan cannot be given.

There was a generally low awareness of any schedules of standard costs maintained by the local authorities among the respondents. However, it was reported that the grants paid by some local authorities do not seem to reflect the actual cost of the adaptations. This suggests that some local authorities may have introduced maximum limits for various categories of works, regardless of the funding limits under the grant schemes and the cost of undertaking the adaptations:

The feedback is that they are not reflecting the costs people are able to get when they approach builders for quotes. And builders can increase their costs when they hear it is a grant job.

There have been reports of local authorities...only paying grant-aid on the basis of their own estimate of what the cost of the adaptations should be; not the actual quotes that builders gave for the work. But, the grants are overlapping so unsure whether this is in relation to the old scheme or the new one or both.

In order to overcome the issue of the funding limits being inadequate to cover larger works, one respondent suggested that applicants should be able to claim a proportion of the costs without a cap on the total level of funding available:

Why can't the County Councils employ registered contractors to do a good job and then the Council pays a proportion and the family pays a proportion. If they would do a proportion rather than a set amount of money, it would be more realistic.

In relation to the issue of applicants having to raise the 5 per cent shortfall in funding under the HAG Scheme, another respondent suggested that local authorities should have a discretionary power to make a 100 per cent payment to applicants on low incomes:

Councils should be able to make 100 per cent grant payment to people earning less than €30,000. That flexibility used to exist. 100 per cent funding should still be a possibility. Under the previous scheme, [X local authority] would have paid 100 per cent grants in some cases but it was not commonly known, as it was discretionary.

5.9 Lack of Flexibility

There was a broad consensus among the representative organisations that participated in the research that the revised housing adaptation grant schemes do not seem to allow for sufficient flexibility or discretion in local responses to meet the specific housing needs of particular applicants:

Feedback from local authorities and user groups is that it isn't sufficiently flexible...The local authorities operate under Regulations and to do something flexible and quick, within the limits of the statute is very difficult.

...there's no recognition that needs may change. They don't seem to have discretionary powers in anything. The model has to fit everybody and if you don't fit it, tough.

5.10 Contractors and the Construction Process

Many of the respondent organisations who participated in the evaluation reported that applicants for housing adaptation grants can have great difficulty in getting the requisite two or three quotes from building contractors, although some noted that this had become easier:

Three quotes are very difficult to get. From the builder's point of view, giving a quote is a lot of work for a job you know you're not going to get.

...it's difficult because you have to get three quotes and it costs builders to give quotes and sometimes they know there's a good chance they wouldn't get it. I know some builders quote too high because they don't want to get the job. But that's probably not the case now!...Getting the quotes can be very off-putting for older people because they're not used to dealing with builders.

It was reported that contractors can be unwilling to get involved in grant-funded works, as advance payment for materials is normal practice:

I've heard that builders will offer to do a better deal if you pay cash and don't get involved in the schemes. People are saying it will get better because of the recession but it might get worse because they will want cash more. Builders normally want some cash paid up-front for materials. Why can't the schemes pay up-front? For other state schemes they do, like with schools they do pay a proportion up-front.

Furthermore, if problems arise, costs may increase during construction, which can be very hard to predict for the purpose of a fixed quote:

It's difficult to get an accurate price for the quote. If space is limited, they may need to knock an old extension and costs can go up if there are problems.

There seemed to be a generally low level awareness of any registers of contractors and respondents questioned whether many local authorities maintained them:

I know [X local authority] will give you a list of builders but a lot of County Councils think it's up to yourself to go and find a builder.

However, it was generally felt that registers of contractors would be a valuable resource for applicants.

Some respondents felt that the local authorities select the contractor on the basis of the quotes submitted, without giving applicants any choice, even though they may be paying a substantial amount themselves:

They should let the family choose the builder because they will go on recommendations from other people who have had work done. They're going to have to add a lot of their own money so it's in their own interests to get a cheaper builder if they know of one who is registered and reliable.

The older person has to get quotes from A, B and C and the County Council will say We're accepting B's quote and there's no explanation as to why. The older person may prefer A or C but that has no bearing on it. The County Council decides which quote it's accepting.

A key issue that arose in relation to the construction process is that applicants are often vulnerable and may not be in a position to project-manage construction work, without any assistance from the local authority. This can be particularly difficult for people without any family support:

Applicants are vulnerable and they're being asked to manage a building project. They're given a list of builders but the local authorities don't check the quality of the build or that they don't take out your bathroom and then go off-site for six months. They don't provide the support for the applicant to manage the project.

There were several reports of applicants who had experienced serious problems with poor workmanship. Applicants may not have the personal or financial resources to resolve such problems but, under the schemes, no assistance is available from the local authorities:

A lot of people seem to have trouble with builders, things like flooding the bathroom.

We've heard horror stories that an older person gives their percentage, the local authority asks the older person 'Are you happy with the job?' the money is paid and then cracks start appearing. The local authority has washed their

hands of the case and the older person is left with a botched job that they don't have the resources to resolve. They have to find builders to get and submit three quotes, manage the works and then, in certain circumstances, they have to pursue the builder through the courts.

The schemes are designed to encourage cowboy behaviour by builders.

Some representative organisations argued that the local authorities should play a more active role in helping applicants to obtain quotes and vet contractors:

Very few older people do that [engage contractors] themselves; it's family. It's quite difficult for people to do. I personally think that it would be better if the local authorities did it for them. Instead of contracting out the works, specific people who have been vetted by the local authority and got Garda clearance, could do the works and older people wouldn't have to go through the rigmarole. It's too much, in my experience. It would be so much easier if they were recommended. It's all this bureaucracy; it's too much for older people.

Other representative organisations argued that the local authorities should be able to undertake some adaptation works by direct labour, giving the example of a group of hospitals with an 'action van' doing minor adaptations to facilitate people returning home from hospital:

Direct labour would be an ideal approach. The Royal Hospital Donnybrook, St. Vincent's Hospital and a third hospital, there are three, do something similar. They have a - I think it's called an Action Van. There's a central administration so whatever requests come in from OTs, they're passed on and the man with a van is on the phone for more urgent things. He has maybe two or three things per day that need doing pre-discharge.

Age Action's Care and Repair Programme was cited as an example of a voluntary organisation providing a repair service by direct labour using volunteers:

We have a number of volunteers who are very handy at everything and we've tested them out. We have twenty locations for Care and Repair country-wide...But we only do small repairs...The Care and Repair brand is getting a higher profile, which gives tremendous reassurance for clients. But the organisations are not Age Action branches, it's local community groups. We don't give grants but we do have a package designed and we train the first and maybe second batch of volunteers. Then we give the trainers notes etc. for training new volunteers. It's a neat way of disseminating...We have two FAS handymen, who work a half-week each, and an old van...Irish Life has funded the programme by €250,000 per year and that's what has made the scheme possible. It will be reduced now but it will still be at €200,000, which will cover publicity and staffing.

This organisation felt that contracting minor repairs out to a voluntary organisation may be a good approach for the local authorities:

Voluntary organisations are better placed to do repairs. You could have service level agreements with voluntary organisations, which you already have in relation to the management of housing.

5.11 Fast-Tracking

There seemed to be a general feeling that the MAG Scheme has not achieved the aim of providing a 'fast track' grant for smaller adaptations. There was a general feeling that this was because an OT assessment was still required by many local authorities, which could cause long delays. It was suggested that the MAG Scheme might work more effectively as a fast-track scheme if the 'man with a van' model used by some hospitals was used to directly provide simple adaptations:

I heard of a really good system in Meath, where a man with a van visits ahead of the person leaving hospital and puts in grab rails and so on. There's no queue-jumping or not being discharged and blocking beds when you just want to go home...It was the Stroke Unit...I think Tallaght Hospital does the same.

5.12 Other Issues

The representative organisations that participated in the evaluation highlighted several additional issues with the operation of the housing adaptation grant schemes, including applicants living in the same household being deemed ineligible, difficulties with the maintenance and repair of equipment, inconsistency in the implementation of the Fire Regulations and lack of access to the schemes for voluntary housing associations, which are discussed below.

Eligibility: An issue regarding eligibility for the grant schemes was identified in relation to cases where two members of a household, such as an older person caring for an adult child with a disability, each need separate adaptations. It was reported that some local authorities refuse to award two grants, on the grounds that the adaptations are to the same property:

There are several cases like this of older people living with their adult children with disabilities needing separate adaptations but they're not eligible to get funding under both schemes.

There seems to be a lack of consistency between and even within local authority areas regarding this issue, with one advocate reporting:

I consulted three different County Councils on one issue; 'If two people are living in the house who need adaptations, is there one grant or two grants available?' [X local authority] said yes but [Y and Z local authorities] said no. But, I know of one applicant in this situation who has been successful in [Z local authority]. A lot seems to depend on who you get.

Maintenance and Repair of Equipment: Under the current system, the applicant, rather than the local authority or the HSE, owns any equipment or assistive technologies funded under the schemes and is responsible for arranging and paying for any servicing and repairs required. However, without having contracts in place with a service level agreement as the HSE does for certain items, it was argued that the person can experience difficulties in getting replacement parts, arranging for a company to undertake the repairs and managing without the equipment in the interim:

There's...an issue around who takes responsibility for repairs and whether the HSE has contracts in place. A lot of companies are based up North and it's hard to get them to come down to Dublin to do a repair. If something breaks, it's very hard to go back to the HSE and get personal assistant hours back until it's repaired. The grant is not just about getting building work done, it's about the assistive technology to make things work. It's not just a case of is the ramp or door wide enough...It can be hard to get replacements parts.

Fire Regulations: An inconsistency in the implementation of the housing adaptation grant schemes was reported in relation to the application of the Fire Regulations. It appears that some local authorities will fund adaptations to allow lift access to the first floor for a person with a physical disability, while others will not:

Normally, our families are happy with a lift upstairs. But there are Fire Regulations so that's not allowed by some Councils. The Fire Officer won't allow a person with a disability on the first floor in [X local authority] but in [Y local authority] they do it left, right and centre - that's if there's no room to extend downstairs. The vast majority don't want the child's accommodation downstairs because the family is sleeping upstairs at night and they need to be close.

Lack of Access to the Schemes for Voluntary Housing Associations: A drawback of the housing adaptation grant schemes for the voluntary housing sector was identified, as housing associations can only apply for grant funding on behalf of a specific tenant. However, tenants have rarely been identified at the planning stage and the capital funding schemes do not provide sufficient funding to develop fully

wheelchair accessible units. This makes it difficult for housing associations to develop new, fully wheelchair accessible units:

People want to live in independent housing and mixed-in with the general population. But housing associations say that their funding doesn't allow the scope to build bigger units or pay for fixtures and fittings for wheelchair users. To get the grant, housing associations have to apply on behalf of an individual but very few have thought about tenants at the planning stage. That's a barrier; that housing associations can only apply in the name of an individual. It might be an incentive to include wheelchair accessible units if they could apply up-front for funding. [X housing association] is developing on [X street] and agreed to provide two wheelchair accessible units for us. They're not ideal but they might suit someone who uses a wheelchair but can transfer independently. We've told that if we want them they will go ahead but there's no money to make any changes because they couldn't afford to include wheelchair units. But, if the housing association could apply for the grant up-front, it would be an incentive to build more wheelchair units.

Box 5 below gives a summary of the key points from the interviews and focus groups with representative organisations.

Box 5 Summary of Issues Raised in Interviews and Focus Groups with Representative Organisations

- 7 interviews and 2 focus groups with 9 representative organisations took place.
- Consensus that the schemes can have a very positive impact on the lives of applicants. Enabling people to remain living in their own homes / return home from hospital are particularly positive aspects of the scheme.

Application Process:

- Local authorities have tended to adopt quite a bureaucratic role, which is overly focused on procedure. They do not always provide a supportive service for applicants and do not seem to have systems in place to respond to applicants' needs (e.g. literacy difficulties, difficulties dealing with financial information).
- Delays and backlogs in many local authority areas reported.
- The level of paperwork required can be daunting and administrative errors can cause delays and stress.

Means Testing:

- Mixed views on means testing were expressed, with most arguing that the introduction of means testing on a national basis was a regressive step, while two organisations expressed the view that it is an equitable way of distributing limited resources.
- Issues identified included the creation of a poverty trap for people with a disability, failure to take into account the additional costs of having a disability, insufficient flexibility to cater for applicants whose income has changed or will change substantially as a result of their disability, failure to take into account mortgage payments, failure to support young adults who wish to remain living in the family home, intrusiveness and difficulties gathering the required paperwork.

Prioritisation:

- The systems of prioritisation operated by the local authorities not generally considered equitable or transparent.
- The manner in which the applicant's case is presented can affect the outcome.
- The prioritisation of people with a terminal illness was considered often not the best use of resources.
- People with progressive conditions are not prioritised at an early enough stage and their longer-term needs not considered.
- Emergencies (e.g. boiler broken in winter) not responded to and applicants cannot reclaim expenditure if they go ahead.

OT Assessments:

- Inconsistencies between local authorities and between public and private clients in the same area were highlighted, particularly in relation to whether an assessment is required, waiting times and whether the applicant has a choice of OT.

Inadequate Funding of the Schemes:

- Major cause of concern. Many local authorities had suspended the schemes, many were only paying grants to Priority 1 applicants and there were large backlogs of applicants on waiting lists. As a consequence, the schemes are failing to meet the needs of people requiring adaptations to return from hospital.
- Geographical inconsistencies included the level of funding allocated to each local authority, the length of time the schemes had been suspended and the amount of time applicants must spend on a waiting list.

Inadequate Funding Limits Available Under the Schemes:

- Maximum funding limits often inadequate to cover costs, particularly for larger works such as extensions. Consequently, applicants must meet a large shortfall or reduce the scale of the adaptations.
- The 5 per cent shortfall under the HAG can create difficulties for many applicants – forced to borrow or rely on charity.

Lack of Flexibility:

- Consensus that insufficient flexibility or discretion in local authority responses to meet the specific housing needs of particular applicants.

Contractors and the Construction Process:

- Applicants can have great difficulty in getting 2 or 3 quotes although it is easier now that the building boom has ended.

6. Focus Groups with OTs

6.1 Introduction

OTs are often closely involved in the housing adaptation grant application process so it was considered very important to get their views on how the new schemes were working in practice, particularly with regard to arrangements for OT assessments and the scheme of prioritisation. Three focus groups were undertaken with a sample of OTs working in the wider Dublin, Cork and Galway areas. The focus groups aimed to investigate how smoothly the new grant schemes were working, from the perspective of the OTs undertaking functional assessments of applicants for the grants on behalf of the local authorities. They also aimed to ascertain whether any effective models of inter-agency working had emerged. The results of these focus groups are discussed below.

6.2 Role of the Public and Private OT

It was clear from the focus groups that the role of the OT in relation to the housing adaptation grant schemes varies substantially, largely depending on the local authority, the HSE community OT department(s) and the relationship between them. Some local authorities rely on OTs employed by the HSE to assess applicants for the housing adaptation grant schemes, others rely on OTs in private practice, while the remainder do not seek the input of OTs at all.

Staffing and resources have a major impact on the ability of a community OT department to assist the local authority in assessing applicants for housing adaptation grants. It was reported that, in previous years, large backlogs of applicants referred for an OT assessment had built-up, leading to delays of up to one year in some areas. More recently, staffing levels had improved and referrals decreased in many cases, leading to a decrease in the waiting time for an appointment to four to six weeks. However, this experience was not universal and some participants reported that they still had a large backlog and were still under pressure.

In terms of resources, it was reported that, in some areas, local authorities had made payments to the HSE for assessing applicants for housing adaptation grants. However, in some cases, this funding did not filter down to the community OT departments in question so there were no additional resources to do the work.

Despite these difficulties, focus group participants reported several benefits to involving the community OTs in assessing applicants for the housing adaptation grant schemes. First, some OTs argued that the community OT is best placed to undertake these assessments because many applicants are already their clients so they will have a good knowledge of their condition and can provide continuity of care, although not all OTs agreed on this point:

What about the local authorities who don't use the community OTs at all? They can liaise with the community OT but for continuity of care and complex conditions, the community OT needs to be on the team.

Second, some OTs felt that the community OT is in a position to maintain sustained contact with the applicant over a lengthy period of time:

We're in a position to deal with it over a long period. Community OTs do the hand-holding. We're the liaison between the council, the client and sometimes the builder.

In complex cases, this sustained contact may include several home visits prior to submitting the application, in addition to a follow-up visit, on completion of the adaptations:

You might have to make twenty visits or more to one client, depending on the complexity of the case.

Once we have done the assessment, their file is closed but once they ring to say they got the grant, it's open again. We have an open caseload of about forty. We always send a letter and ask the client to contact the person when they get news.

It should be noted that twenty visits seems to be the exception rather than the rule, as resources would not allow this in many areas.

Third, it was argued that community OTs will explore a range of options, including mobile assistive technologies, prior to recommending an adaptation, which leads to more efficient use of resources:

We look at other options, rather than adaptations, with the client first. A private OT would just refer them back.

Fourth, it was argued that the community OT can liaise with other HSE services and personnel on behalf of the applicant, including care teams, equipment and maintenance departments:

And what about nurses and the rest of the care team? The community OT needs to assess what additional supports do they need in complex cases.

It's better if they have a HSE OT because, with the HSE, you have access to the hospital maintenance department that does minor adaptations. And we have the community welfare officers and the environmental health officers so we have access to their areas as well.

A model of inter-agency working which was identified as best practice by both the HSE OTs and the local authority housing practitioners involved, has been developed in two areas of County Cork (outlined in Box 6 below).

Box 6 Example of Inter-Agency Working

Cork County Council – North Division has funded a full HSE OT position since 1995 (at a cost of ca. €60,000 p.a.), while Cork County Council - West Division has funded half of a HSE OT position since 2003. This money is not used to fund a particular post specialising in housing because it is considered preferable that all of the community OTs maintain expertise in the housing field and no delays will arise if someone is on leave. However, the community OT department does prioritise housing.

On receipt of a list of recent applicants for housing adaptation grants from the County Council, the community OT department contacts the applicants to arrange a home visit for an assessment. At the moment, there is no service level agreement in place, although this was under consideration, but it takes about four weeks to provide an assessment report, depending on the complexity of the case. The strengths of this system were identified as follows:

The HSE and the County Council are both very happy with this arrangement because we would be aware of what is realistic and we would have done lot of refusals. We also do a lot of ground work. Some clients would take fifteen visits. From our point of view, the client is then part of the HSE process and there would be links there.

The OTs involved were very positive about how well this model works:

It's extraordinary how well it works. It seems so simple.

Two difficulties with this system were identified by OTs. First, the positions funded are not permanent in either North or West Cork. Second, 'buck passing' can occur, whereby the OT may be blamed for a decision that an applicant does not agree with.

Notwithstanding the potential benefits of utilising the HSE community OT department, several local authorities have opted to rely on OTs in private practice to assess applicants for the housing adaptation grant schemes. Focus group participants reported that backlogs and delays in the HSE system were often a factor in this decision and that private OTs have done a good job clearing the backlog in many areas.

There seemed to be less variation in the role played by OTs working in private practice in relation to the housing adaptation grant schemes. The involvement of private OTs normally comprises a home visit and assessment, with a full report. Follow-up visits would take place if an issue arose at the request of the local authority but this is unusual:

When the health board's workload increased, the Councils decided to move to a consultancy model. They would ask me to do a home visit and a report with specifications and then there's follow-up by the Council's architectural technician during the progress of the work. I would be very unlikely to return.

However, private OTs pointed out that they are always available by telephone if the local authority has any queries, which often happens.

Benefits of using private OTs include a fast and responsive service. Several private OTs reported that they had developed an excellent working relationship with the relevant local authorities. However, some drawbacks were also reported. First, it was argued that, if the community OT is not involved in the housing adaptation process, there is a lack of continuity of care and a lack of a link with other supports provided by the HSE. Second, an OT working in private practice made the point that a lot of newly-qualified OTs are graduating from university and setting-up in private practice because of a lack of jobs within the HSE. There was concern that these OTs have

very little experience and no expertise in the housing field but applicants for the housing adaptation grants would not necessarily know the difference:

Most of the clients haven't a clue what an OT is. Any Joe Soap could go out to them.

Third, OTs do not have the equivalent of a professional institute which accredits qualifications and requires a certain level of experience for full membership. There is the AOTI but full membership is open to all qualified OTs. It was suggested that local authorities requiring applicants to get a private OT report should maintain a list of recommended OTs in the area. Finally, some community OTs had also undertaken assessments applicants for the housing adaptation grant schemes on a private basis, in their own time. Some of these OTs reported that, when they were being paid by the client, they had felt under pressure to agree to the adaptations that the client wanted, even when this went against their professional judgement:

The problem with private practice is that there's an expectation that if you're paying them, that they will get something for you. If the council pays the OT directly, you can direct their expectations well.

I did a couple of assessments privately and I didn't like it. They want you to put what they want in the report. They might be asking for more than what they needed, like extra bedrooms when they have them already.

Several participants in the focus groups agreed that the most effective arrangement would be for the local authorities to employ their own in-house OT, although there was no consensus on this point:

In the long-run, local authorities will have to employ an OT themselves. It could be an extended role because they could work on more than just the grants, on areas like public access and amenities. Each Council should employ a full-time OT. Access is usually looked after by an engineer with no background in functional assessment.

I think if there was an OT in every Council, it would work better. You're dealing with engineers who don't value what you do or put worth on what you're saying. Things like roads come higher in the pecking order for funding.

6.3 Impact of new Schemes

The OTs who participated in the focus groups concurred that the new grant schemes have a very positive impact on the lives of older people and people with a disability whose applications are successful:

I think it's important to highlight that it's a fabulous scheme. It's a great resource for people with disabilities and it makes a huge difference to their lives. Families are a lot more prepared to come on-board if they get help. It's a huge help to carers as well.

The social and economic benefits of keeping people out of A&E Departments by preventing falls and accidents in the home and of enabling people to stay living in their own homes rather than having to move to an institutional setting were highlighted.

6.4 Areas for Improvement

Despite the overall positive impact of the new grant schemes, the OTs who participated in the focus groups identified several key concerns, in relation to the operation of the new housing adaptation grant schemes.

Lack of Involvement in All Applications: A key issue of concern was that OTs are not always involved in the housing adaptation grant process. It was reported that practice varies geographically, with some local authorities referring all applicants for an OT assessment, some referring none and others only referring certain applicants requiring a large suite of works or only referring those applying under the HAG Scheme but not those applying under the MAG Scheme.

There was a general consensus that every applicant for the HAG and MAG Schemes should be assessed by an OT, as they specialise in functional assessment:

I think there should be an OT on every housing grant. It's our role and we're qualified on the medical / functional side.

It was argued that the involvement of an OT at an early stage leads to the most efficient use of resources. The OT will go through all of the options regarding equipment with the client, before housing adaptations are considered:

Sometimes, you could get a bath lift for about €500, without ripping out the bath, which costs about €1,000. A lot of money is spent on unnecessary adaptations.

However, some focus group participants did express concerns regarding resources in their own areas and the feasibility of community OTs covering all applications under the new grant schemes.

It was argued that the approach of only referring applicants for an OT assessment if their needs were complex or the proposed works extensive was a somewhat arbitrary decision. The types of works which some local authorities felt equipped to deal with without an OT assessment included the installation of a stairlift and the provision of a level-access shower. However, several examples were given of grant-funded adaptations which may have seemed straightforward but ended-up being unsafe or unusable as they were not appropriate for the client's needs. These examples included providing grab rails in the wrong position for a person who favoured one side, installing a ramp from the footpath to the front door that was too steep to use safely, installing a shower seat that was too high for the person to use, providing a level-access shower without widening the bathroom door which was not wide enough to fit the person's zimmer-frame and installing a stairlift for a person who did not have good enough balance to use it safely:

They [the local authority] put in inappropriate adaptations and then clients are referred back to us when they can't use them.

It was suggested that, if the local authorities wished to deal with certain types of 'straightforward' adaptations themselves, technical staff could be provided with training on housing adaptations or work with an OT to develop standard specifications for certain types of simple adaptations, such as an accessible bathroom:

...there should be agreed training or OT involvement to come up with a minimum spec. If it's complicated, it comes to me but I think maybe they're doing a little too much themselves. But, we have a good working relationship and when you know someone, you can't say that!.

However, the consensus was that this approach would not be ideal and, ideally, an OT should always be involved, as needs vary, depending on the applicant and the assistive technology required:

...if a client needs a self-propelling shower chair, for instance, the dimensions of the shower may change. There's no simple case...One person might be able to manage a self-propelling shower chair but another might need a reclining chair.

Even if it's straightforward, OTs should still be involved. For example, if a seat is installed too high or a grab-rail put up on the wrong side, the client can't use it safely. Or if a stairlift is installed but the client doesn't have good enough balance, the client can't use it. And there's no way of recycling fixed goods.

In some areas, it was reported that the local authority relies on the applicant's own GP or hospital consultant or the HSE Medical Officer to assess and/or prioritise some

or all applicants. There was a concern that, while doctors are expert in medical conditions, it is OTs who are expert in functional assessment, have training and experience in housing adaptation and have up-to-date knowledge of the assistive technologies available. A further concern was that the GP, consultant or medical officer does not always visit the applicant in their own home environment, which was considered essential:

The OT should be involved in prioritising because they're in a better position. OTs have a far better idea than the Medical Officer and the GP wouldn't know the circumstances and they will often sign things if asked to.

In [X, Y and Z local authorities], they're told they need a letter from their consultant. It doesn't make any sense because haven't seen the home environment and not aware of their functional requirements.

It was argued that input from consultants should only be required for unusual conditions, if requested by the OT:

In some cases, it [the involvement of a consultant] is appropriate. For example, I had a case where it was an unusual condition and the consultant would know about its progression. Occasionally I might need their input, if I'm not very familiar with an unusual condition.

In other areas, it was reported that the local authority relies on its engineers to assess and/or prioritise some or all applicants. There was a concern that local authority technical staff do not have any expertise in either medical conditions or functional assessment and that they over-rely on the technical standards set out in Part M of the *Building Regulations* and *Building for Everyone* (NDA, 2002). These standards were considered out-of-date, as assistive technologies have increased in size. In any case, it was argued that they constitute absolute minimum standards for general accessibility which are not appropriate for the specific needs of many people with a disability:

They're not customising or assessing the person functionally, which would include things like heights and favouring one side.

If builders and inspectors are using 'Building for Everyone', that would be totally inadequate for our clients' needs. I work in the National Rehabilitation Hospital and, in a lot of our cases, it will be a shower trolley and you need a turning circle.

Cognitive functioning and perception [which determine whether a stairlift would be appropriate for the person] are huge issues that the engineer can't assess.

Variation in Stage of Involvement: Many of the OTs who participated in the focus groups reported that, in their areas, applicants are asked to provide quotes from building contractors with their grant application. If planning permission is required for the proposed works, they may also be asked to supply the plans and planning permission. It was argued that this approach wastes the applicant's time and money, as they are often not in a position to make a decision regarding the types of adaptations that would best suit their needs, prior to the OT assessment. Undertaking a functional assessment of the applicant, advising on the assistive technologies that would be most suitable and the dimensions required to accommodate them is an important part of the OT's role:

The problem I have is that when people fill-out their quotations, it's based on nothing. Like, they're trying to get an extension because they thought they couldn't get a stairlift in. Then, when I arrive, I tell them that you can get a stairlift to fit that corner but they've already paid an architect to do drawings.

We cover all situations and visit almost every client. But, we go to the house and the client will already have two quotes that went in with their application. One had even got plans drawn up but he didn't need them because we wouldn't make a recommendation for an extension.

If you go looking for drawings or quotes prior to the grant, it is a waste of time because you don't know what you're asking for or what you should be asking for.

It was suggested that applicants should only have to submit a short application form without any quotes, drawings or planning permission. The local authority should then respond with an acknowledgement and the name of the relevant OT, who should complete the full application form with the applicant.

Lack of Inter-Agency Co-ordination

It was clear from the focus groups with OTs that the relationship between the local authority and the community OT department is very important in determining whether public OTs will be involved in assessing applicants for housing adaptation grants and how productive any arrangements for inter-agency working will be. Developing good personal relationships, ensuring low staff turnover and maintaining channels of communication were identified as particularly important in ensuring the success of inter-agency working arrangements.

Failure to involve OTs at various stages in the housing adaptation grant process can have negative consequences for applicants. Participants in two focus groups

reported that they were not kept informed of the status of applications by the local authority. It was argued that, ideally, the local authority should send the community OT department details of recent applications, if they were not already clients, so they could be listed for home visits:

We often don't know who has applied or what for so there should be a cover note with the details set out given to the OT. They can then be listed as someone who has applied to the scheme and visited as time allows.

In some cases, OT involvement during the construction phase to ensure compliance with specifications and/or follow-up home visits on completion of the adaptations for health and safety purposes may also be necessary. Due to the timescale of the application process, applicants' files with the community OT department are generally closed by the time a grant is awarded. If the local authority does not inform the community OT department of the status of an application, they are forced to rely on the applicant to contact them, which they are not always in a position to do:

We had an adaptation just down the road and it worked out well because we were involved at the time. We had supplied a shower chair but it wouldn't fit over the toilet but the toilet could go back because it wasn't plumbed in yet.

There have been cases where ceiling tracks go in, for example, and we don't know for months and then we find that the sling is inappropriate.

You have to catch them before the adaptation has started but we don't usually know when adaptations are starting or finishing.

In one area, it was reported that the relationship between the community OT department and the local authority had broken down completely and it was thought that a local authority engineer now made decisions without any input from an OT:

We don't really work with the County Council and there's a history to it. We used to submit reports for our clients and have meetings with the County Council. We were trying to set-up a system. But, they wanted us to come in and say which clients need to get a grant but we said we would need to assess them...Now, we provide more of a support measure for our clients and our report goes in with the specs. But, they never contact us.

There was a lot of anger among these OTs about their lack of involvement in the housing adaptation grant process:

A few OTs put a lot of work into trying to build a team and a system and the door was slammed in their faces.

Box 7 below outlines an example of where inter-agency co-operation was reported to be working well and could be used as a model for the housing adaptation grant schemes.

Box 7 Practice Example

The model of inter-agency working that has developed between Bray Town Council and the Community OT Department was identified as best practice by the HSE OTs involved. It was reported that an excellent working relationship had developed in Bray, whereby the local authority engineer and the OT visit the property and draw up the specifications together, which was considered ideal. Regular meetings between the local authority and the community OTs take place, to review the status of all applications on hand, so both agencies were up-to-date.

Although this model was being used for the adaptation of local authority houses for its own tenants, it was put forward as a 'very workable' model for the housing adaptation grant schemes. The importance of personalities and co-operation in successfully operating this model was highlighted.

System of Prioritisation Too Vague: There was some criticism that the existing system of prioritisation had been drawn up without consulting with the AOTI's Housing Advisory Group:

We're there to facilitate, not to run the whole thing. OTs by-and-large run the show nationally. And we weren't involved in the process when the schemes were changed.

It was generally agreed that the existing system of prioritisation is too vague to be useful. There was broad agreement that prioritising people with terminal conditions often proved not to be the optimal use of funds. It was argued that families often do not appreciate the timescale involved with the application process and construction works. Consequently, applicants often come home to noise, dust and disturbance or, in many cases, the works are not finished prior to the person passing away so the adaptations are never used. It was argued that a lot can be done with mobile equipment for palliative care, which may prove more appropriate:

Palliative care is another issue and I'm not sure how they work that out. For someone who is terminally ill, how worthwhile is it to go through all

that upheaval, stress, noise and dust? It seems like people are encouraged to go for adaptations if they are palliative.

I had one client and the family wanted a downstairs bathroom for him so, for the last weeks of his life, the house was in chaos and he never used the shower. If they have a year or two left, fair enough but, with some, it's not hard to put a timeframe on it.

Furthermore, it was argued that people with progressive conditions, such as multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease should be designated high priority, prior to being unable to manage at home without adaptations. This would enable applicants to have the required adaptations carried out while they are still well enough to oversee the works:

One problem is that the Council is looking at a person's function now, not what the client needs in the long-term and what their level of functioning will be in the future.

We have made recommendations over the years based on the fact that a client might end-up in a wheelchair eventually. So, we recommended a wet room, open plan layout and so on.

In order to overcome these issues, OTs in several areas have developed more detailed systems of prioritisation, with perhaps ten criteria, in consultation with the relevant local authorities:

I went in with a clear prioritisation scheme. I was told only total emergencies - no such thing as bathroom conversions! But, if the emergency, didn't fall under the list, e.g. kids with autism, you could have a discussion with the Council.

There was no consensus between the OTs who participated in the focus groups regarding the ideal role of the OT with regard to prioritising applicants for the new housing adaptation grants. Some OTs felt that their role was to undertake a functional assessment of the applicant and provide a report detailing the housing adaptations required, if any. However, it was argued that prioritising one of their clients above another was not part of their role, if they both needed adaptations:

Three or four years ago, we were asked to get involved in prioritising and we didn't agree to do that. It's not the job of the OT to prioritise for local authorities.

In other areas, the community OT department had agreed to prioritise applications, as a way of ensuring that the clients who were in most urgent need received a

housing adaptation grant as soon as possible. The mechanism for designating the prioritisation varied between areas:

In [X local authority], we give the prioritisation. If it's a complex case, we will go in and discuss it with them.

I work as a private OT and I make the prioritisation and the Council makes the decision regarding how much they're giving.

In one area, where the community OT department had no involvement in the housing adaptation grants process, there was a strong feeling that whatever system of prioritisation the local authority was using was not working equitably, which was largely attributed to local politics:

I have just moved from the hospital and I had two very different clients there. One had a stairlift and ramp installed immediately under the grant scheme and was home within three days. The other case had to go looking for a grant for it and was put on a waiting list. It's just not fair.

It's genuinely archaic. It's all local politics.

Lack of Co-ordination with HSE Supports: Another issue of concern that was raised by the OTs who participated in the focus groups was that housing adaptations often need to be synchronised with the provision of a Home Care Support Package from the HSE. A lack of co-ordination between the local authorities and the HSE was identified, so a person can have the Home Care Support Package required to enable them to live in their own home but not the housing adaptations or *vice versa*. It was felt that this lack of co-ordination can lead to people being unable to return home from hospital or to remain living in their own home for long periods of time:

...there's the issue of people taking-up beds in hospitals. In the case of one man, there was no money for his care at home so his wife couldn't apply for the grant because she couldn't look after him. Now the grant money has gone so she still can't apply for another year. It needs more flexibility, there's a lack of planning.

A lot of the time, they may need a specialised piece of equipment and they contact us once their housing adaptation is done. For instance, shower and toilet chairs are quite expensive, it's at least €2,000 for a paraplegic chair. So, they could have the equipment and no adaptation and vice versa.

It was noted that public expenditure housing adaptations can result in substantial savings in terms of public expenditure on inappropriate institutional care and Home

Care Support Packages. However, the separate remits and budgets of the local authorities and the HSE can obscure these economic benefits:

You need to look at the overall needs of the person into the future. If you're spending on one area, you're saving on another. If it was a combined budget, it would be easier to see.

This suggests a need for a more effective model of inter-agency working.

Building Contractors' Workmanship, Experience and Training:

Some OTs expressed concern regarding whether housing adaptations are always built to their specifications, which are formulated to suit each client's specific needs. It was reported that building contractors often supply the accessible bathroom package available from the local builders' suppliers but the sanitary ware may not always have suitable dimensions:

Builders feel like they've done one adaptation, they've done them all. They go to the builder's suppliers and get a job lot and it may not be appropriate, like the shower chair may be way too high for the person to use safely. Nobody checked or followed-up. They say that they go by Part M but they don't really and it still might not be suitable anyway.

In one area, where the community OT department did not have any involvement in the housing adaptation grant process, it was reported that the local authority did not seem to require plans for the layout of proposed adaptations. This approach was seen as having high potential for a bad outcome for the applicant:

One of the first visits I did was to an elderly couple and they were having their bathroom adapted. The builder was there and I said can I see the plans and he just laughed.

More generally, the lack of vetting of building contractors by the local authority increases the risk of problems arising with the general quality of the adaptation work:

I have a case that went to court because it was not built to spec. There were cracks in the foundations and everything. It took five years to sort out and a lot of stress.

It was argued that building contractors should have some training in housing adaptations and be approved by the local authority and included on the panel of contractors. This would make it easier for applicants to find a builder and they could also be more confident about the standard of workmanship:

It comes back to having a list of contractors available because you have older people looking for builders in the yellow pages!...the standard of work isn't consistent. You can write specs until you're blue in the face but it has to be done properly. What is needed is a panel of builders with some training and also a final inspection that it has been done properly.

We're dealing with an elderly population and they can find it very difficult to find builders and project manage.

Finally, it was reported that one local authority does not always inspect every completed adaptation, relying on spot checks and the client signing a form to say that they are satisfied with the work. It was argued that all adaptations should be inspected by the local authority on completion and there should be staged signing-off for larger works, such as extensions.

Lack of Provision for Servicing, Repair or Recycling of Equipment:

The issue of responsibility for the servicing and repair of equipment, such as stairlifts and tracking hoists, was also raised by the OTs who participated in the focus groups. As any equipment provided under the housing adaptation grant schemes belongs to the applicant, the local authority does not currently get involved in this issue. However, it was reported that, as a lot of the suppliers are based in Northern Ireland, getting equipment serviced or repaired can be a difficult and lengthy process for applicants, which can leave them stuck for several weeks. It was suggested that the local authorities should enter into servicing and repair contracts with suppliers, with a service level agreement:

If the equipment breaks down, who is responsible for the care and maintenance, say for lifts and stairlifts? When they go wrong, they're stuck.

The issue of local authorities not recycling equipment was also raised, as it was felt that an opportunity to make scarce resources stretch further is being wasted:

Often people only use the stairlift for a while and then they have to move downstairs or, if it's palliative, they die. It can then be taken out and re-used.

Two examples of other organisations recycling equipment were given:

MND [Irish Motor Neurone Disease Association: <http://www.imnda.ie>]...have a stock of stairlifts, which they can take in and out. It's equipment recycling on a national level. It's so much more cost-effective to do that.

UK Social Services have a stock of equipment and it's stored for when someone else needs it. The Councils take them in and out, stairlifts, hoists and so on.

A summary of the issues raised during the OT focus groups is provided in Box 8 below.

Box 8 Summary of Issues Raised in the OT Focus Groups

The occupational therapists (OTs) who participated in focus groups reported that:

- The grant schemes can have a very positive impact on the lives of older people and people with a disability. There are both social and fiscal benefits in keeping people out of A&E Departments by preventing falls and accidents in the home and in enabling people to stay living in their own homes rather than having to move to an institutional setting.
- Practice varied regarding the involvement of OTs in the housing adaptation grant process. Some local authorities refer all applicants, some refer none and others refer only certain applicants requiring a large suite of works. Alternative approaches included relying on the applicant's GP, consultant or the HSE Medical Officer to assess and/or prioritise applications or relying on local authority engineers.
- OTs felt that failure to involve an OT in the housing adaptation process, even for seemingly straightforward grant-funded adaptations, often resulted in unsafe or unusable adaptations because they were not appropriate to the client's needs.
- OTs recommended that every applicant for the HAG and MAG schemes should be assessed by an OT as they are expert in functional assessment, have training and experience in housing adaptation and have up-to-date knowledge of the assistive technologies available.
- OT assessments should take place at a very early stage in the housing adaptation process, it was felt, prior to the submission of any quotes, drawings or planning permission to the local authority. Advice on the assistive technologies that would be most suitable and the dimensions required to accommodate them were required prior to making a decision on the type of adaptation to be undertaken.
- If Community OTs are to be used, effective inter-agency working is essential. Although good practice has emerged in some areas, it is not present in many local authority areas. Developing good working relationships, ensuring low staff turnover and maintaining open channels of communication about the status of all

applications were identified as important in developing mechanisms for effective inter-agency working.

- The existing system of prioritisation under the HAG scheme was considered too vague and more detailed systems of prioritisation were adopted in some areas. It was argued that prioritising people with terminal conditions often proves not to be the optimal use of funds, due to the timescale of the adaptation process, while people with progressive conditions should be designated high priority and a longer-term view of their needs taken.

7. Interviews with Contractors

7.1 Introduction

Semi-structured telephone interviews were undertaken with ten contractors operating in various parts of the country, each with experience of working under one or more of the schemes. The aim of the interviews was to investigate how smoothly the new grant schemes were operating, from the perspective of the contractors undertaking the works (see also Section 1 above).

The most common types of housing adaptation reported by the contractors interviewed were the widening of doorways and the installation of double-glazing windows. The next most common adaptations were those to bathrooms, where existing bathrooms were converted or downstairs bathrooms installed. Other jobs mentioned less frequently were installation of stair lifts and handrails, while one contractor specialised in extensions. The contractors interviewed generally held broadly positive views towards the new grant schemes, while identifying some areas of their operation where they felt there was room for improvement, which are discussed below.

7.2 Areas for Improvement

Panels of Contractors and Schedules of Standard Costs: The Departmental guidance for the administration of each of the new grant schemes recommended the introduction of Panels of Contractors and Schedules of Standard Costs by each local authority. The interviews aimed to explore the extent to which the contractors interviewed were aware of these new Panels and Schedules and how well they were operating from a contractor's perspective.

Regarding Panels of Contractors, the guidance recommends that each local authority should advertise for interested contractors who wish to have their names included on a Panel of Contractors available to carry out works under the schemes and that these Panels should be made available to the public and to applicants. The purpose of these panels is to assist applicants in obtaining quotes and engaging a contractor. Although all of the contractors interviewed had experience of undertaking works funded under the new grant schemes, most were not aware of any of the local

authorities in the areas in which they worked maintaining a Panel of Contractors. They stated that they would be happy to be included on any such panel. Of the ten contractors interviewed only two mentioned being aware of the panel of contractors and they would also have been happy to be included on it.

Regarding Schedules of Standard Costs, again the guidance recommends that each local authority should assemble and publish a Schedule of Standard Costs for each element of works available for funding under the schemes. The purpose of these schedules is to stabilise costs and create greater transparency in the quote and grant process. However six of the contractors interviewed were not aware of any of the local authorities in the areas in which they worked maintaining a Schedule of Standard Costs. Only one was aware of and had seen the schedule of standard costs and three gave no response to this question. Therefore, none of the respondents were able to comment on whether any Schedules of Standard Costs were up-to-date and accurately reflected local costs.

The lack of awareness of Panels of Contractors and Schedules of Standard Costs among the contractors interviewed raises important questions regarding the extent to which Departmental guidance on these issues is being implemented by the local authorities.

Payment: Not surprisingly, arrangements for payment under the new grant schemes emerged as a key issue for contractors. Departmental guidance stipulates that local authorities should pay an approved grant to the applicant on the satisfactory completion and inspection of the finished works. The applicant is responsible for paying the contractor and may not be in a position to do so until receipt of the grant.

The key issue identified by the contractors interviewed in relation to payment was delays. In total, six of the ten interviewees reported that they usually experienced delays in payment, with reports of payment being made as late as eight weeks after completion of a job. Delays in payment were a matter of particular concern for the smaller contractors and had created particular difficulties for two of the respondents, whose suppliers had recently reduced their credit periods from ninety days to thirty days, which meant that they had to cover the cost of materials themselves while awaiting payment. Despite this delay, all of the contractors interviewed but one

reported that they had always eventually been paid in full. The remaining interviewee did not respond to this question.

Seven of the contractors interviewed mentioned that payment on completion was not normal practice for non-grant-funded jobs. The remaining contractors did not respond to this question. Normal operating procedure for contractors appeared to be a two-stage payment scheme. The first payment, normally one-third of the quoted price, is usually paid up-front, allowing the contractors to pay for materials and labour, with the remainder being payable upon satisfactory completion of the work. However, payment on completion would not discourage the contractors interviewed from accepting future contracts under the grant schemes.

One contractor identified the policy of the local authorities paying the grant to the applicant, rather than paying the contractor directly, as problematic. He felt that this encourages the applicant to view the grant as their own money to spend as they wish, rather than as a grant given for a specific purpose. He gave an example of an applicant who had attempted to renegotiate the amount of work to be done in an attempt to keep some of the left-over money, although the matter was resolved and the original quote was honoured.

Quoted prices are occasionally subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances but this does not generally appear to cause any problems. Two of the contractors interviewed had experienced cases where unforeseen changes to the work required had arisen, resulting in increases from the quoted price. For example, in one case, it became clear when a bath was removed that the supporting beams needed replacing. In another case, extra tiling was needed in order to complete the refurbished bathroom satisfactorily, which had not initially been included in the job. In both cases, the local authority was involved and the revised price agreed.

Despite the issues raised in relation to payment, many of the contractors interviewed mentioned that they were always confident of payment if the job was funded under one of the grant schemes. One referred to it as *money in the bank, even if it is someone else's bank*.

Other Issues: The contractors interviewed raised a number of other issues in relation to the operation of other aspects of the grant schemes. First, the HAG

Scheme covers up to 95 per cent of the total cost of the works, up to a ceiling, and the applicant must pay the shortfall. One contractor mentioned that some applicants have great difficulty in paying the remainder of the cost. Although, the contractor was paid in full, he was aware that covering the remaining 5 per cent of the cost of works was putting the client under considerable financial pressure.

Second, another contractor raised some issues regarding the means test. He felt that, people were often awarded grants who did not appear to need them, judging on the basis of their houses and apparent wealth. He argued that some people who knew how to *work the system* were being awarded grants, while more needy people who may be less able to pursue their application were missing out.

Finally, one contractor mentioned that some houses needed structural work going beyond the scope of the grant schemes. In one case, which was funded under the HOP Scheme, he was close to reporting the poor state of the house but was unsure to whom it should be reported or whether it would be in the best interest of the householder.

7.3 Contractors' Conclusion and Recommendations

In relation to the impact of the current downturn in the construction industry on the availability of grant-funded jobs, some of the interviewees felt that there will be more competition among contractors for the jobs available under the grant schemes in the future. This suggests that it may be easier in coming years for applicants to get sufficient quotes to support their applications and to engage a contractor to undertake works within a reasonable timeframe and at a reasonable cost.

The contractors interviewed made several suggestions in relation to how the new grant schemes could be improved, from their perspective:

- Introduce staged payments.
- Introduce direct payment of contractors by the local authorities.
- Ensure that one contact person in each local authority is responsible for the grant schemes, making the local authorities more accessible to the contractors undertaking grant-funded works.
- Consider introducing a system whereby the local authorities deal directly with the contractors rather than the applicants.

- Ensure that help with the paperwork associated with making an application is available to applicants, as required.

A summary of the issues raised by the contractors in the telephone interviews is in Box 9 below.

Box 9 Summary of Issues Raised by Contractors

The building contractors interviewed reported that:

- There was low awareness of any panels of contractors or schedules of standard costs being maintained by the local authorities. This suggests that implementation of Departmental guidance on these issues may be low.
- Payment on completion of a job is not normal practice for non-grant-funded jobs. A two-stage payment system is the norm, whereby one-third of the price is normally paid up-front to cover materials and labour.
- Delays in payment of up to eight weeks following the completion of a job were a key concern, compounded by recent reductions in the credit period available from builders' suppliers, from ninety days to thirty days. Contractors were always confident of eventual payment for grant-funded jobs and these delays would not deter contractors from accepting grant-funded jobs in the current economic climate.
- There will be more competition among contractors for the grant-funded jobs available. This suggests that it will be easier for applicants to get quotes to support their applications and to engage a contractor to undertake work within a reasonable timeframe and at a reasonable cost, pressure to agree to the adaptations that the client wanted, if the client is paying, even when this went against their professional judgement.

Appendix I. Call for Submissions - Further Information and Consultation Form

Copy of advertisement:



Comhshaol, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



Centre for
Housing Research

Evaluation of Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes Call for Submissions

The Centre for Housing Research has been commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to undertake an evaluation of three housing adaptation grant schemes:

- Housing Aid for Older People Scheme,
- Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability,
- Mobility Aids Grant Scheme.

These revised schemes were implemented in 2007 and this evaluation aims to examine the impact of the new regime on applicants and to identify any issues influencing the effectiveness of the schemes in meeting the housing needs of older people and people with a disability.

Submissions should be received by: **Monday, 20th April, 2009**

For further information, please see www.chr.ie or contact us at chr@ipa.ie or (01) 8898256.

Please note that all comments, observations and submissions will be subject to the Freedom of Information Acts, 1997-2003.

The call for submissions published in the national press was supplemented by further information and a consultation form, which were posted on the Centre for Housing Research website (www.chr.ie), as shown below.



Comhshaol, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



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We are interested in hearing the views and experiences of:

- Older people and people with a disability,
- Carers,
- Occupational therapists,
- Organisations working with older people or people with a disability,
- Contractors who have undertaken grant-funded adaptation works,
- Other interested parties.

We would like to hear about:

- The experiences of applicants for grant aid under the schemes,
- The impact of works funded under the schemes on the quality of life of older people and people with a disability,
- How the operation of the schemes could be improved,
- Other relevant issues.

Submissions should be sent to:

Mary Bruton
Centre for Housing Research
57-61 Lansdowne Road
Dublin 4
Email: chr@ipa.ie

Submissions should be received by:

Monday, 20th April, 2009

For further information, please see www.chr.ie or contact us at chr@ipa.ie or (01) 8898256.

Please note that all comments, observations and submissions will be subject to the Freedom of Information Acts, 1997-2003. Consequently, when submitting material, parties should identify any information which they do not wish to have released, together with an accompanying explanation. A list of those who made submissions may be included in the final publication, with an overview of key findings.



Comhshaol, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



Centre for
Housing Research

Evaluation of Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes Consultation Form

1. Contact details

Name: _____

Address: _____

E-mail address: _____

2. Are you making this submission as an individual or on behalf of an organisation? (please tick)

Individual

Organisation

3. If you are making this submission as an individual, are you:

(please tick)

an older person

a person with a disability

a carer

an occupational therapist

a building contractor

other

please specify: _____

4. If you are making this submission on behalf of an organisation, please give the following details:

Name of your organisation: _____

How long has your organisation been in existence? _____

How many members does your organisation currently have? _____

Does your organisation represent or provide services for any of the following groups?
(please tick)

Older people

People with a disability

Carers

Occupational therapists

Building contractors

Other

please specify: _____

What are your organisation's main aims and objectives? _____

What are your organisation's key activities? _____

5. Which of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes have you (or members of your organisation) had experience of using since the revised schemes were introduced in November 2007? (please tick)

Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

6. Please comment on your (or your organisation's members') experiences of applying for grant aid under the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes.

7. Please comment on the impact of the works funded under the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes on the quality of life of older people and/or people with a disability.

8. Do you have any suggestions regarding how the operation of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes could be improved?

9. Please use this space to make any other comments or suggestions:

Thank you for taking the time to give us your views.

Please return your completed consultation form to Mary Bruton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4 (or e-mail to chr@ipa.ie) by Monday, 20th April, 2009.

Appendix II. List of Submissions

- Age Action
- Arthritis Ireland
- Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI) - Housing Advisory Group
- Ms. Breda Bridges
- The Carers Association
- Cavan Monaghan Occupational Therapy Service
- Citizens Information Board
- Clúid Housing Association
- Co. Longford Citizens Information Service
- Cork County Council
- DeafHear.ie
- Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI)
- Donegal County Council
- Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council
- Mr. Gary Fay
- Ms. Joanne Finnegan
- Mr. Maurice Fitzgerald
- Mr. Dan Fitzgibbon
- Ms. Marian Hall
- HSE Community Occupational Therapy Services, Dublin South East
- Ms. Breege Hyland
- Irish Council for Social Housing (ICSH)
- Irish Hospice Foundation
- Irish Wheelchair Association (IWA)
- Ms. Eileen Kelly
- Ms. Marcella Kelly
- Kildare Network of People with Disabilities in Ireland (PwDi)
- Kilkenny County Council and Kilkenny Borough Council
- Limerick Advocacy Service
- Limerick County Council
- Longford County Council Housing and Planning SPC
- Ms. Mary Lynch

- Mr. Paul Manning
- Mr. David Morgan
- National Federation of Voluntary Bodies Providing Services to People with Intellectual Disability
- Occupational Therapy Department, Community Services, North Cork
- Occupational Therapy Department, Coolnagarrane Health Centre, Skibbereen
- Occupational Therapy Department, Sacred Heart Hospital, Castlebar
- Occupational Therapy Department, Waterford Community Services
- Occupational Therapy Department, Wicklow Community Services
- Occupational Therapy and Social Work Services, National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dún Laoghaire
- Ms. Genevieve O'Halloran
- Rehab Group
- Ms. Kathy Sinnott, MEP
- South Dublin County Council
- Waterford County Council
- West Cork Carers Support Group Ltd.
- Mr. Christopher Woodruffe

Appendix III. Local Authorities Survey - Cover Letter and Survey Form



Comhshaol, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



Centre for
Housing Research

[Insert name & address of Director of Service - Housing]

6th May 2009

Re. Evaluation of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes

Dear [insert name of Director of Service - Housing],

The Centre for Housing Research has been commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to undertake an evaluation of the three Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes for Older People and People with Disabilities:

- the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme,
- the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability,
- the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme.

Revisions to these schemes were implemented in 2007 and the evaluation aims to examine the impact of the new regime on applicants and to identify any issues influencing the effectiveness of the schemes in meeting the housing needs of older people and people with a disability. This evaluation will inform the further development of these schemes for future years.

We would very much like to draw on the expertise and experience of the local authorities in administering the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes as part of the evaluation process. To this end, I would be very grateful if you could complete the enclosed questionnaire survey and return it by Friday, 22nd May 2009 to Mary Bruton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4. If you would prefer to return the questionnaire by e-mail, please download it from www.chr.ie and e-mail the completed MS Word document as an attachment to chr@ipa.ie. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact Vanda Clayton at vclayton@ipa.ie or 01-8898256. Many thanks for your assistance.

Yours sincerely,

David Silke, Director



Comhshool, Oidhreacht agus Rialtas Áitiúil
Environment, Heritage and Local Government



Centre for
 Housing Research

Evaluation of the New Grant Schemes for Older People and People with a Disability

(the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme, the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability and the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme)

Local Authorities Survey

SECTION A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. **Name of local authority:** _____

2. **Please give details of a contact person for the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability:**
 Name: _____
 Address: _____
 Telephone: _____
 E-mail: _____

3. **How many members of staff does your local authority have working on the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability (excluding HSE staff and private consultants)?**

Full-time	Part-time	
		Administrative staff
		Social workers
		Engineers
		Clerks of works
		Other staff (please specify): _____ X

SECTION B. POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

4. **Do you prioritise valid applications under any of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability?** (please delete as appropriate)

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme	Yes / No
B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability	Yes / No
C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme	Yes / No

If 'yes', please attach details of your schemes of prioritisation.
 If 'no' to all, please go to Question 6.

5. On what basis do you prioritise eligible applicants, who have satisfied the means test and whose need for the proposed works has been established, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? Please rate the level of priority from 1 to 7 for all categories that apply, where 1=highest priority and 7=lowest priority. Please put 'n/a' if a category is not considered.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Priority (1-7)	
	Condition of the property
	Medical condition or disability
	Need for works in order to return home from hospital or nursing home
	Age
	Income
	Length of time on waiting list
	Other (please specify) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Priority (1-7)	
	Level of functioning
	Degree of dependence on carers
	Need for adaptations in order to return home from hospital or nursing home
	Age
	Income
	Length of time on waiting list
	Other (please specify) _____ X

Please tick here if you use the Scheme of Prioritisation on the Basis of Medical Need recommended by the Department of the Environment, Heritage & Local Government.

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Priority (1-7)	
	Level of functioning
	Degree of dependence on carers
	Need for adaptations in order to return home from hospital or nursing home
	Age
	Income
	Length of time on waiting list
	Other (please specify) _____ X

6. Are applicants required to have an assessment by an Occupational Therapist (OT) as part of the application process, under any of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? (please tick as appropriate)

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

<input type="checkbox"/>	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes (please specify circumstances) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

<input type="checkbox"/>	Always
<input type="checkbox"/>	Never
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes (please specify circumstances) _____ X

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

- Always
- Never
- Sometimes (please specify circumstances) _____ X

If 'never' for all, please go to Question 9.

7. Please indicate who normally carries out OT assessments? (please tick all that apply)

- HSE Occupational Therapist
- Private OT retained by the local authority either on a contract or a case-by-case basis
- Private OT engaged directly by the applicant
- Other (please specify) _____ X

8. In your local authority area, what are the average waiting times for getting an appointment for an assessment with a local authority, HSE and private OT? Please indicate the average number of weeks for all that apply.

Weeks	
	HSE Occupational Therapist
	Private OT retained by the local authority either on a contract or a case-by-case basis
	Private OT engaged directly by the applicant
	Other (please specify) _____ X

9. Apart from Occupational Therapists (OTs), who else is involved in assessing and/or prioritising applications for the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? (please tick all that apply)

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

- Local authority administrative staff
- Local authority social workers
- Local authority engineers
- Local authority clerks of works
- HSE medical officer
- Other (please specify) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

- Local authority administrative staff
- Local authority social workers
- Local authority engineers
- Local authority clerks of works
- HSE medical officer
- Other (please specify) _____ X

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

- Local authority administrative staff
- Local authority social workers
- Local authority engineers
- Local authority clerks of works
- HSE medical officer
- Other (please specify) _____ X

10. From receipt of a valid application, how long does it normally take to notify the applicant of a final decision, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? Please indicate the average number of weeks in each case.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Weeks	
	Ineligible cases (e.g. due to not satisfying the means test or the age requirement)
	Approval or refusal without OT assessment
	Approval or refusal with OT assessment

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Weeks	
	Ineligible cases (e.g. due to not satisfying the means test)
	Approval or refusal without OT assessment
	Approval or refusal with OT assessment

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Weeks	
	Ineligible cases (e.g. due to not satisfying the means test)
	Approval or refusal without OT assessment
	Approval or refusal with OT assessment

11. Do you maintain a List of Contractors to help applicants to obtain quotes? **Yes / No**
 (please delete as appropriate)

If 'yes', please attach a copy of your List of Contractors.
 If 'no', please go to Question 14.

12. If you do maintain a List of Contractors, when was it last updated and when will it next be updated?

Month	Year	
		Date last updated
		Date due to be updated again, if applicable

Please tick here if the List of Contractors is updated as required and there is no formal review period.

13. If you do maintain a List of Contractors, how do you advertise it to potential applicants? (please tick all that apply)

- Posted on website
- Included in printed information about the schemes
- Provided on request
- Other (please specify): _____ X

14. Do you maintain a Schedule of Standard Costs? (please delete as appropriate) **Yes / No**

If 'yes', please attach a copy of your Schedule of Standard Costs.
 If 'no', please go to Question 16.

15. If you do maintain a Schedule of Standard Costs, when was it last updated and when will it next be updated?

Month	Year

Date last updated

Date due to be updated again, if applicable

Please tick here if the Schedule of Standard Costs is updated as required and there is no formal review period.

16. What is the maximum proportion of the total cost of the proposed works that your local authority will fund, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability?

- A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme _____%
- B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability _____%
- C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme _____%

17. Does your local authority stipulate maximum levels of grant-aid that may be awarded for different types of works, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? (please delete as appropriate)

- A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme **Yes / No**
- B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability **Yes / No**
- C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme **Yes / No**

If 'yes', please attach details of the maximum levels of grant aid available for each type of works.

18. In your view, does the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme operate effectively as a fast-track scheme for minor works? (please delete as appropriate) **Yes / No**

If 'no', please go to Question 19.

If 'yes', please list any factors causing delays below:

19. Do you have written procedures for appealing against the local authority's decision? (please delete as appropriate) **Yes / No**

If 'yes', please attach a copy of your appeals procedures.

If 'no', please go to Question 22.

20. If you do have written appeals procedures, how are they advertised to applicants? (please tick all that apply)

- Posted on website
- Included in printed information about the schemes
- Provided on request
- Sent to the applicant with the decision
- Other (please specify): _____ **X**

21. **On receipt of a valid appeal against the local authority's decision, how long does it normally take to notify the applicant of a final decision?**

Weeks

22. **Do you have a procedure in place for reviewing approved grants which have not been drawn down by the applicant within six months?**
(please delete as appropriate) **Yes / No**

If 'no', please go to Question 23.

If 'yes', please give details below:

SECTION C. ACTIVITY DURING 2008

23. **How many valid applications were made in 2008, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? How many of these applications were approved, refused and withdrawn prior to a decision being reached?** Your local authority's returns to the DoEHLG for 2008 are shown below. Please complete the gaps and amend any inaccuracies.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Applications 2008	
	Approved
	Refused
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total applications

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Applications 2008	
	Approved
	Refused
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total applications

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Applications 2008	
	Approved
	Refused
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total applications

24. **Approximately what proportion of works funded in 2008 fell within each tenure category, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability?**

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

% Works Funded 2008	
	Owner-occupied housing, including houses bought under tenant purchase scheme
	Right to reside
	Other (please specify) _____ x
100%	Total works funded in 2008

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

% Works Funded 2008	
	Owner-occupied housing, including houses bought under tenant purchase scheme
	Private rented accommodation
	Accommodation provided under voluntary housing funding schemes (CAS & RSS)
	Accommodation occupied by persons living in communal residences
	Right to reside
	Other (please specify) _____ x
100%	Total works funded in 2008

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

% Works Funded 2008	
	Owner-occupied housing, including houses bought under tenant purchase scheme
	Private rented accommodation
	Accommodation provided under voluntary housing funding schemes (CAS & RSS)
	Accommodation occupied by persons living in communal residences
	Right to reside
	Other (please specify) _____ x
100%	Total works funded in 2008

25. What types of works were most frequently funded in 2008, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? Please rank the types of works funded in 2008 from 1 to 10 for all categories that apply, where 1=most common and 10=least common. Please put 'n/a' if no applications were granted in a category.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Frequency (1-10)	
	Structural repairs or improvements, including roof and chimney
	Re-wiring
	Dry-lining
	Repairs to/replacement of windows and doors
	Provision of central heating, water & sanitation
	Contract-cleaning
	Painting
	Radon remediation
	Smoke alarms
	Other (please specify) _____ x

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Frequency (1-9)	
	Access ramps
	Stairlifts

	Downstairs toilet facilities
	Accessible showers
	Adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access
	Extensions
	Provision of central heating, water & sanitation
	Smoke alarms
	Other (please specify) _____x

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Frequency (1-6)	
	Grab-rails
	Access ramps
	Level access showers
	Stairlifts
	Smoke alarms
	Other (please specify) _____x

26. How many applicants were required to have an assessment by a HSE or a private Occupational Therapist (OT) in 2008, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability?

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Applicants 2008	
	HSE Occupational Therapist
	Private OT retained by the local authority on a contract or a case-by-case basis
	Private OT engaged directly by the applicant

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Applicants 2008	
	HSE Occupational Therapist
	Private OT retained by the local authority on a contract or a case-by-case basis
	Private OT engaged directly by the applicant

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Applicants 2008	
	HSE Occupational Therapist
	Private OT retained by the local authority on a contract or a case-by-case basis
	Private OT engaged directly by the applicant

27. How many of the applicants who were assessed by a private OT directly engaged by themselves recouped the cost, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? (please put 'n/a' if this question is not applicable)

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Applicants 2008

Recouped the cost of an assessment by a private OT

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Applicants 2008

Recouped the cost of an assessment by a private OT

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Applicants 2008

Recouped the cost of an assessment by a private OT

28. Please estimate the proportion of applicants on behalf of whom a political representative made a submission to the local authority, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability?

- A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme _____%
- B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability _____%
- C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme _____%

29. For each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability, how many valid applications were not approved for payment in 2008 and why? If an application was not approved for payment for several reasons, please count each reason separately.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Not Approved 2008

- Ineligible because the applicant did not satisfy the means test
- Ineligible because the proposed works were not considered essential repairs
- Eligible but not high enough priority to be funded
- Eligible and high priority but not enough funding available to be funded
- Other (please specify) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Not Approved 2008

- Ineligible because the applicant did not satisfy the means test
- Ineligible because the proposed adaptations were not considered necessary / appropriate, within the context of the applicant's level of functioning
- Eligible but not high enough priority to be funded
- Eligible but not enough funding available to be funded
- Other (please specify) _____ X

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Not Approved 2008	
	Ineligible because the applicant did not satisfy the means test
	Ineligible because the proposed adaptations were not considered necessary / appropriate, within the context of the applicant's level of functioning
	Eligible but not high enough priority to be funded
	Eligible but not enough funding available to be funded
	Other (please specify) _____ X

30. How many appeals were made in 2008, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? What was the outcome of these appeals? Your local authority's returns to the DoEHLG for 2008 are shown below. Please complete the gaps and amend any inaccuracies.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Appeals 2008	
	Local Authority's decision fully upheld
	Local Authority's decision partially upheld
	Local Authority's decision overturned
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total Appeals

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Appeals 2008	
	Local Authority's decision fully upheld
	Local Authority's decision partially upheld
	Local Authority's decision overturned
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total Appeals

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Appeals 2008	
	Local Authority's decision fully upheld
	Local Authority's decision partially upheld
	Local Authority's decision overturned
	Withdrawn prior to a decision being reached
	Total Appeals

31. What were the reasons for any instances of overturning local authority decisions on appeal, under each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability? If a decision was overturned for several reasons, please count each reason separately.

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Appeals 2008	
	Original application deemed eligible, when reviewed
	Additional information provided by the applicant
	Change in the circumstances of the applicant
	Other (please specify) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Appeals 2008	
	Original application deemed eligible, when reviewed
	Additional information provided by the applicant
	Change in the circumstances of the applicant
	Other (please specify) _____ X

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Appeals 2008	
	Original application deemed eligible, when reviewed
	Additional information provided by the applicant
	Change in the circumstances of the applicant
	Other (please specify) _____ X

32. For each of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability, how many applications for grant-aid were approved but not claimed in 2008 and why?

A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Unclaimed 2008	
	Works are not yet complete
	Works are complete but, on inspection, were not built to the specifications approved by the local authority
	Applicant did not go ahead because works no longer required due to a change in their circumstances
	Applicant did not to go ahead because not prepared to build to the local authority's specifications
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works exceeded the maximum grant-aid available and the applicant was unable to pay the shortfall
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works increased since the contractor provided the quote
	Unknown - no reason given by applicant for not going ahead
	Other (please specify) _____ X

B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Unclaimed 2008	
	Works are not yet complete
	Works are complete but, on inspection, were not built to the specifications approved by the local authority
	Applicant did not go ahead because works no longer required due to a change in their circumstances
	Applicant did not to go ahead because not prepared to build to the local authority's specifications
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works exceeded the maximum grant-aid available and the applicant was unable to pay the shortfall
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works increased since the contractor provided the quote
	Unknown - no reason given by applicant for not going ahead
	Other (please specify) _____ X

C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Unclaimed 2008	
	Works are not yet complete
	Works are complete but, on inspection, were not built to the specifications approved by the local authority
	Applicant did not go ahead because works no longer required due to a change in their circumstances
	Applicant did not go ahead because not prepared to build to the local authority's specifications
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works exceeded the maximum grant-aid available and the applicant was unable to pay the shortfall
	Applicant did not go ahead because total cost of works increased since the contractor provided the quote
	Unknown - no reason given by applicant for not going ahead
	Other (please specify) _____ X

- 33. Were any of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability suspended by your local authority in 2008?** (please delete as appropriate)
- | | |
|---|----------|
| A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme | Yes / No |
| B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability | Yes / No |
| C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme | Yes / No |

If 'no' to all, please go to Question 36.

- 34. If any of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability were suspended in 2008, please indicate for how many weeks:**

Weeks	
	A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme
	B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability
	C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

- 35. If any of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability were suspended in 2008, please indicate the reasons for the suspension:** (please tick all that apply)

- A. Housing Aid for Older People Scheme
- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | High level of applications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | DoEHLG funding allocation for 2008 used |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 20% local authority funding not available |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (please specify): _____ X |

- B. Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability
- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | High level of applications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | DoEHLG funding allocation for 2008 used |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | 20% local authority funding not available |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (please specify): _____ X |

- C. Mobility Aids Grant Scheme
- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | High level of applications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | DoEHLG funding allocation for 2008 used |

- 20% local authority funding not available
- Other (please specify): _____ X

SECTION D. OUTLOOK FOR 2009

36. How do you manage your financial commitments under the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability across financial years? (please answer this question with the assistance of the Head of Finance, if possible, and attach additional pages if required)

37. Please describe your local authority's overall experience of operating the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability in 2008, in terms of what worked well and what worked less well? (please attach additional pages if required)

38. Do you foresee any difficulties with the operation of the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability in 2009? (please attach additional pages if required)

39. Do you have any suggestions on how the new grant schemes for older people and people with a disability could be improved? (please attach additional pages if required)

Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire!

Please return the completed questionnaire by **Friday, 22nd May 2009** to **Mary Bruton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4**. If you have any queries, please contact Vanda Clayton at vclayton@ipa.ie or (01) 8898256.

Appendix IV. Topic Guide for Interviews with Local Authorities

1. Introduction

- Background and terms of reference for the evaluation.
- Confidentiality.

2. Background Information on Interviewee

- Role of the interviewee in relation to the new grant schemes.

3. Application Process

- What are the main channels for informing potential applicants about the availability of Housing Adaptation Grants?
- Do applicants generally need help with understanding the terms and conditions of the schemes, completing the application forms and so on? Is this time consuming?
- What are the steps involved in making an application under the new grant schemes? (including application, supporting documentation, means test, quotes, OT assessment, any assessments by local authority staff, drawings & planning, decision, final inspection, payment).
- How do you prioritise applicants for each of the schemes? (including dealing with over-demand & waiting lists)
- How do you reach a final decision on grant applications? (e.g. on basis of reports, case discussion or recommendation of Medical Officer)
- How many full-time and part-time staff are involved in the grant schemes and what are their roles?
- In your opinion, have the revisions to the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes improved the application process, e.g. in relation to arrangements for OT assessments?
- Do you maintain a Panel of Contractors? (including advertising, dissemination, any concerns regarding liability)
- Do you maintain a Schedule of Standard Costs? (including keeping up-to-date and whether payments can be made in excess of amounts specified)
- Does the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme act as a fast-track scheme?
- What is your appeals process and is it frequently used?

- Are you aware of any difficulties or delays experienced by applicants in applying for the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes?

4. Funding

- Is the DEHLG allocation adequate to meet demand in your local authority?
- Is meeting the local authority's 20% contribution problematic?

5. Other Issues

- Would you like to raise any other issues regarding the operation of the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes?
- Would you recommend any changes to improve the future operation of the schemes within available resources?

Appendix V. Applicant Survey - Cover Letter and Survey Forms

[TO BE PRINTED ON CENTRE FOR HOUSING RESEARCH HEADED PAPER]

August 2009

Dear Sir or Madam,

I am writing to ask for your help.

The Centre for Housing Research has been asked by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to undertake an evaluation of the housing improvement and adaptation grant schemes it funds for older people and those with a disability. As part of the evaluation we would like to get the views of applicants to the schemes.

Your local authority has kindly agreed to send the enclosed short questionnaire to recent applicants to the schemes on our behalf. We do not have access to your name, address or any of your personal information. We would be very grateful if you would complete the questionnaire, as your feedback would be invaluable to us. Please be assured that participation in the survey is voluntary and your response will be completely anonymous. If you are completing this questionnaire on behalf of another person (for example, a child, relative or friend who is unable to fill it out on their own) please complete it from their point of view.

Please return the completed questionnaire to us as soon as possible. A pre-paid envelope is enclosed for your convenience. If you have any queries, please contact Vanda Clayton at (01) 889 8256.

Thank you very much for your help.

Yours faithfully,



David Silke
Director

13 Did you have difficulty finding building contractors to give you quotes for the work? yes no

Please comment:

14 How did you choose a building contractor to do the work? (please tick all that apply)

- recommended by family or friends
- used for previous alterations to your home
- list of contractors from the local authority
- contractor's advertisement
- other (please specify)

15 Was the work completed to your satisfaction? yes no

Please comment:

16 Do you plan to apply for another housing grant in the near future? yes no

Please comment:

Section D Your Comments and Suggestions

17 If you would like to make any comments on the housing grant scheme or suggestions on how it could be improved, please use the space below:



Evaluation of the Housing Aid for Older People Scheme

Survey of Applicants

Section A About Your Grant Application

01 How did you hear about the housing grant scheme? (please tick all that apply)

- word-of-mouth (from a relative, neighbour or friend)
- local authority housing office
- newspaper / radio / television
- internet
- local councillor
- GP or public health nurse
- other (please specify)

02 On a scale of 1 to 5, how did you find the application process, 1 being easy and 5 being difficult? (please circle)

EASY 1 2 3 4 5 DIFFICULT

Please comment:

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Please return the completed questionnaire as soon as possible, in the pre-paid envelope supplied, to Dr. Vanda Clayton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4.

03 What alterations to your home did you include in your grant application and which of these alterations were approved for grant funding? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	structural repairs or improvements	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	provision of heating, water and/or sanitary services
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	repairs to or replacement of windows and/or doors	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	painting
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	contract-cleaning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	radon remediation
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	dry-lining	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	re-wiring
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)			

If your grant application was unsuccessful, please go to Section B
 If your grant application was successful, please go to Section C

Section B For Unsuccessful Grant Applicants

04 What reasons were you given for the refusal of your grant application? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	means test	<input type="checkbox"/>	not enough funding available
<input type="checkbox"/>	works not considered essential repairs	<input type="checkbox"/>	don't know / can't remember
<input type="checkbox"/>	not high enough priority	<input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)

05 Did you appeal the decision to the local authority? yes no

06 Did you appeal the decision to the Ombudsman? yes no

07 What was the final outcome of your appeal? (please tick one)

original decision upheld and grant refused
 original decision overturned and grant awarded
 appeal on-going

Please continue to Section B on back page -->

Section C For Successful Grant Applicants

08 On a scale of 1-5, how involved in decision-making did you feel, in relation to the type of alterations to be made to your house, 1 being not involved and 5 being very involved? (please circle)

NOT INVOLVED 1 2 3 4 5 VERY INVOLVED

09 Did the alterations enable you to: (please tick all that apply)

return home from hospital or other form of care
 remain living at home
 live more independently (including personal care)
 access your home more easily from the street or garden
 move around inside your home more easily
 worry less about accidents or falls
 live more comfortably
 worry less about the condition of your home

10 Approximately how much funding did you receive through the housing grant scheme?

€

11 Approximately how much did the alterations to your home cost in total?

€

12 How did you cover the additional cost, if any? (please tick all that apply)

no additional costs, the grant covered everything
 savings
 family or friends
 voluntary body (eg. the Society of St. Vincent de Paul)
 discretionary payment from the Community Welfare Officer (HC)
 other (please specify)

Section C is continued overleaf -->

13 Did you have difficulty finding building contractors to give you quotes for the work? yes no

Please comment:

14 How did you choose a building contractor to do the work? (please tick all that apply)

- recommended by family or friends
- used for previous alterations to your home
- list of contractors from the local authority
- contractor's advertisement
- other (please specify)

15 Was the work completed to your satisfaction? yes no

Please comment:

16 Do you plan to apply for another housing grant in the near future? yes no

Please comment:

Section D Your Comments and Suggestions

17 If you would like to make any comments on the housing grant scheme or suggestions on how it could be improved, please use the space below:

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Please return the completed questionnaire as soon as possible, in the pre-paid envelope supplied, to Dr. Vanda Clayton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4.

If you have any queries, please contact Vanda at vclayton@ipa.ie or (01) 889 8256.



Evaluation of the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme for People with a Disability

Survey of Applicants

Section A About Your Grant Application

01 How did you hear about the housing grant scheme? (please tick all that apply)

- word-of-mouth (from a relative, neighbour or friend)
- local authority housing office
- newspaper / radio / television
- internet
- local councillor
- GP or public health nurse
- other (please specify)

02 On a scale of 1 to 5, how did you find the application process, 1 being easy and 5 being difficult? (please circle)

EASY 1 2 3 4 5 DIFFICULT

Please comment:

03 What alterations to your home did you include in your grant application and which of these alterations were approved for grant funding? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	through-floor lift/ stair-lift	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	adaptations to facilitate wheelchair access
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	access ramp(s)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	extension
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	downstairs toilet facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	accessible shower
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)			

If your grant application was unsuccessful, please go to Section B
 If your grant application was successful, please go to Section C

Section B For Unsuccessful Grant Applicants

04 What reasons were you given for the refusal of your grant application? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	means test	<input type="checkbox"/>	not enough funding available
<input type="checkbox"/>	works not considered essential repairs	<input type="checkbox"/>	don't know / can't remember
<input type="checkbox"/>	not high enough priority	<input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)

05 Did you appeal the decision to the local authority? yes no

06 Did you appeal the decision to the Ombudsman? yes no

07 What was the final outcome of your appeal? (please tick one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	original decision upheld and grant refused
<input type="checkbox"/>	original decision overturned and grant awarded
<input type="checkbox"/>	appeal on-going

Please continue to Section D on back page →

Section C For Successful Grant Applicants

08 On a scale of 1-5, how involved in decision-making did you feel, in relation to the type of alterations to be made to your house, 1 being not involved and 5 being very involved? (please tick)

NOT INVOLVED 1 2 3 4 5 VERY INVOLVED

09 Did the alterations enable you to: (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	return home from hospital or other form of care
<input type="checkbox"/>	remain living at home
<input type="checkbox"/>	live more independently (including personal care)
<input type="checkbox"/>	access your home more easily from the street or garden
<input type="checkbox"/>	move around inside your home more easily
<input type="checkbox"/>	worry less about accidents or falls
<input type="checkbox"/>	live more comfortably
<input type="checkbox"/>	worry less about the condition of your home

10 Approximately how much funding did you receive through the housing grant scheme?

€ _____

11 Approximately how much did the alterations to your home cost in total?

€ _____

12 How did you cover the additional cost, if any? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	no additional costs, the grant covered everything
<input type="checkbox"/>	savings
<input type="checkbox"/>	family or friends
<input type="checkbox"/>	voluntary body (e.g. the Society of St Vincent de Paul)
<input type="checkbox"/>	discretionary payment from the Community Welfare Officer (HCW)
<input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)

Section C is continued overleaf →

13 Did you have difficulty finding building contractors to give you quotes for the work? yes no

Please comment:

14 How did you choose a building contractor to do the work? (please tick all that apply)

- recommended by family or friends
- used for previous alterations to your home
- list of contractors from the local authority
- contractor's advertisement
- other (please specify)

15 Was the work completed to your satisfaction? yes no

Please comment:

16 Do you plan to apply for another housing grant in the near future? yes no

Please comment:

Section D Your Comments and Suggestions

17 If you would like to make any comments on the housing grant scheme or suggestions on how it could be improved, please use the space below:

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Please return the completed questionnaire as soon as possible, in the pre-paid envelope supplied, to Dr. Vanda Clayton, Centre for Housing Research, 57-61 Lansdowne Road, Dublin 4.

If you have any queries, please contact Vanda at vclayton@ipa.ie or (01) 889 8256.



Evaluation of the Mobility Aids Grant Scheme

Survey of Applicants

Section A About Your Grant Application

01 How did you hear about the housing grant scheme? (please tick all that apply)

- word-of-mouth (from a relative, neighbour or friend)
- local authority housing office
- newspaper / radio / television
- internet
- local councillor
- GP or public health nurse
- other (please specify)

02 On a scale of 1 to 5, how did you find the application process, 1 being easy and 5 being difficult? (please circle)

EASY 1 2 3 4 5 DIFFICULT

Please comment:

03 What alterations to your home did you include in your grant application, and which of these alterations were approved for grant funding? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	grab-rail(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	level access shower
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	access ramp(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	stairs lift
<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	

If your grant application was **unsuccessful**, please go to **Section B**
 If your grant application was **successful**, please go to **Section C**

Section B For Unsuccessful Grant Applicants

04 What reasons were you given for the refusal of your grant application? (please tick all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> means test	<input type="checkbox"/> not enough funding available
<input type="checkbox"/> works not considered essential repairs	<input type="checkbox"/> don't know / can't remember
<input type="checkbox"/> not high enough priority	<input type="checkbox"/> other (please specify)

05 Did you appeal the decision to the local authority? yes no

06 Did you appeal the decision to the Ombudsman? yes no

07 What was the final outcome of your appeal? (please tick one)

original decision upheld and grant refused

original decision overturned and grant awarded

appeal on-going

Please continue to Section D on back page →

Section C For Successful Grant Applicants

08 On a scale of 1–5, how involved in decision-making did you feel, in relation to the type of alterations to be made to your house, 1 being not involved and 5 being very involved? (please circle)

NOT INVOLVED 1 2 3 4 5 VERY INVOLVED

09 Did the alterations enable you to: (please tick all that apply)

return home from hospital or other form of care

remain living at home

live more independently (including personal care)

access your home more easily from the street or garden

move around inside your home more easily

worry less about accidents or falls

live more comfortably

worry less about the condition of your home

10 Approximately how much funding did you receive through the housing grant scheme?

€ _____

11 Approximately how much did the alterations to your home cost in total?

€ _____

12 How did you cover the additional cost, if any? (please tick all that apply)

no additional costs, the grant covered everything

savings

family or friends

voluntary body (e.g. the Society of St. Vincent de Paul)

discretionary payment from the Community Welfare Officer (HC)

other (please specify)

Section C is continued overleaf →

Appendix VI. Topic Guide for Interviews with Representative Organisations

1. Introduction

- Background and terms of reference for the evaluation.
- Confidentiality.

2. Background Information on the Stakeholder Organisation [if not available online]

- Aims.
- Funding.
- Functions / services provided.
- Organisation's experience in relation to the Housing Adaptation Grants, e.g. research, anecdotal evidence from applicants/carers, practical experience of helping applicants/carers to apply, etc.
- Role of the interviewee within the organisation.

3. Role of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes

- In your view, what is the importance of the role played by the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes?
- What types of housing adaptations are commonly required by people with:
 - physical disabilities.
 - sensory disabilities.
 - intellectual disabilities.
 - mental health issues.
 [or older people].
- Have the new Schemes left any gaps in provision compared to what was available under the old schemes?

4. Eligibility for Grant Aid under the Revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes

Definitions:

- In your view, is the definition of disability [or older people] specified in the revised Regulations & Guidance for Local Authorities:
 - clear and unambiguous?
 - easy to put into operation?

- adequate to ensure that the housing needs of people with disabilities [or older people] are met?
- Would you recommend any changes to the wording of the definition?

Means Testing:

- What impact has the introduction of a standardised system of means testing had on applicants/potential applicants for grant aid?
- In your view, is the means test:
 - clear and transparent?
 - an equitable way of distributing resources?
 - adequate to ensure that the housing needs of people with disabilities [or older people] are met?
- Would you recommend any changes in relation to the means test?

5. Application Process

- What are the main channels for informing potential applicants about the availability of Housing Adaptation Grants?
- Are you aware of any difficulties or delays experienced by applicants in applying for the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes:
 - assessment by an OT.
 - delays in processing applications.
- Have the revisions to the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes improved the application process, e.g. in relation to arrangements for OT assessments?

6. Administration of the Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes by Local Authorities

- In your view, are the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes administered in a consistent fashion across local authority areas?
- Do you think that the systems of prioritisation operated by the local authorities under the revised schemes are equitable and transparent?
- Do you think that the revised schemes allow for sufficient flexibility in local responses to meet the housing needs of particular applicants?

7. Appeals Process

- Are you aware of any difficulties experienced by applicants in relation to obtaining information on or using the appeals procedures?

8. Adequacy of Grant Aid

- In your view, are the levels of grant aid available under the revised Housing Adaptation Grants Schemes sufficient to cover larger adaptations, e.g. extensions?
- In your view, do the Schedules of Standard Costs maintained by the local authorities reflect actual construction costs?
- Do you think it is common for applicants to have to meet a large shortfall or to reduce the scale of the adaptations proposed, due to inadequate grant funding?

9. Works

- Do you think the Registers of Contractors maintained by the local authorities are useful for applicants?

10. Other Issues

- Would you like to raise any other issues regarding the operation of the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes?
- Would you recommend any changes to improve the future operation of the schemes within available resources?

Appendix VII. Topic Guide for Interviews with Contractors

1. Introduction

- Background and aims of the evaluation.

2. Background Information on the Contractor

- How many contracts under the revised grant schemes have you done (*i.e.* since early 2008)?
- Under which of the grant schemes were the works funded?
- What sort of work did you do? / What type of housing adaptations are most commonly required?
- How long did it take? / How long does each of those types of housing adaptation usually take?
- In your view, are the levels of grant aid available under the revised Housing Adaptation Grants Schemes sufficient to cover larger adaptations, *e.g.* extensions?

3. Panel of Contractors

- In which local authority areas do you mainly work?
- Have you ever seen any of those local authorities advertise for contractors interested in being included on a list to help applicants for grants to find contractors?
- If not, would you be interested in being included on a list and why?

4. Schedule of Standard Costs

- In your view, do the Schedules of Standard Costs maintained by the local authorities reflect actual construction costs?

5. Payment

- Were you paid on time?
- Did you ask for a deposit or staged payments? If so, were they made?

- If the quote changed for one reason or another were you paid the new price?
- Do the local authorities pay you directly or give the money to the clients?
- Would the fact that you are only paid after completion of the work put you off accepting future projects funded under the grant schemes?
- Has the downturn in the construction industry affected the amount of work coming through from the grant schemes?

6. Other issues:

- Did any other issues arise because it was a contract funded by a local authority grant rather than a normal job?
- Would you like to raise any other issues regarding the operation of the revised Housing Adaptation Grant Schemes?
- Would you recommend any changes to improve the future operation of the schemes?



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