

Keeping homes safe: a survey of home improvement services across England

November 2024



Nearly eight million people are living in homes that pose a significant risk to their health, wellbeing and independence.

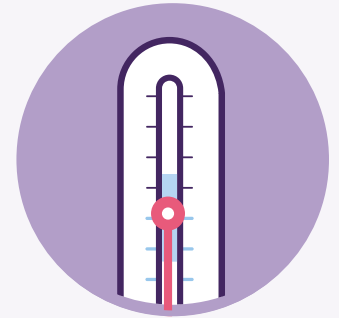
This includes 2.6 million older people, who are one of the most at-risk groups with respect to the health consequences of living in a damp, cold, hazardous home. Dangerous homes can cause or exacerbate respiratory and heart conditions, and cause falls that have life-changing consequences.

Over the last decade, there has been a fall of £2.3 billion spending on private sector home improvement grants, preventing the repair of 600,000 homes and unnecessarily endangering the lives of over a million people. This funding gap has led to

a shrinking of home improvement services across the country, reducing vital support for low-income households to repair, maintain and adapt their homes.

In this report, the Centre for Ageing Better provides an insight into the size and scope of some of the remaining home improvement services, demonstrating the variation of resources available to local areas – all of whom remain operating with a funding scarcity - and the consequences this has for the breadth of services offered.

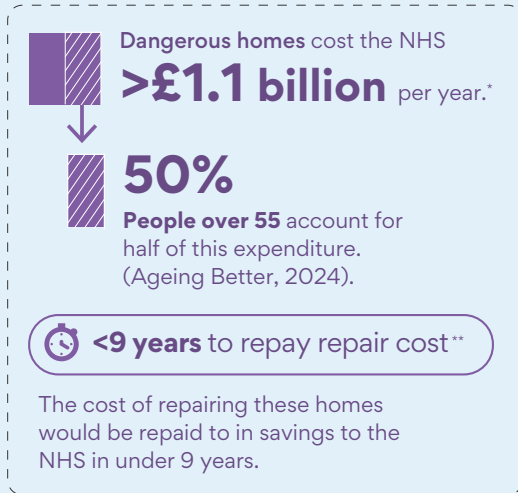
In addition, we provide a vision for what should be available across the country, illustrated by case studies from the handful of areas that have been able to create and sustain comprehensive home improvement services.



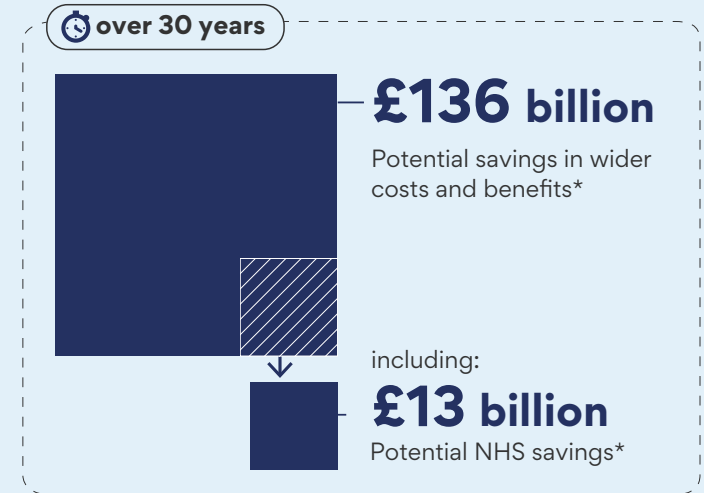
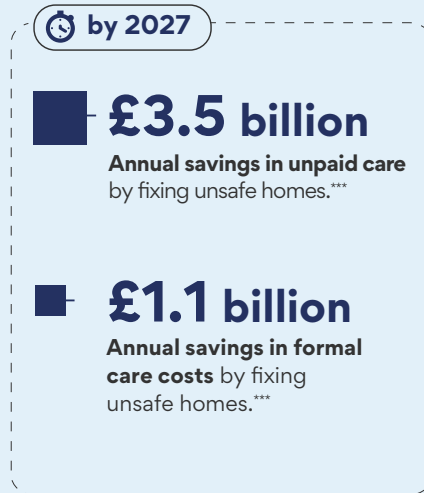
Counting the cost

Fixing unsafe homes not only helps people to live healthier lives, it reduces demand for health and care services, supports prosperous local economies and contributes to net zero targets.

Cost of dangerous homes



Savings made by repairing unsafe homes



* Building Research Establishment (2024)

** Building Research Establishment for the Centre for Ageing Better (2024)

*** Brimblecombe et al (2024)

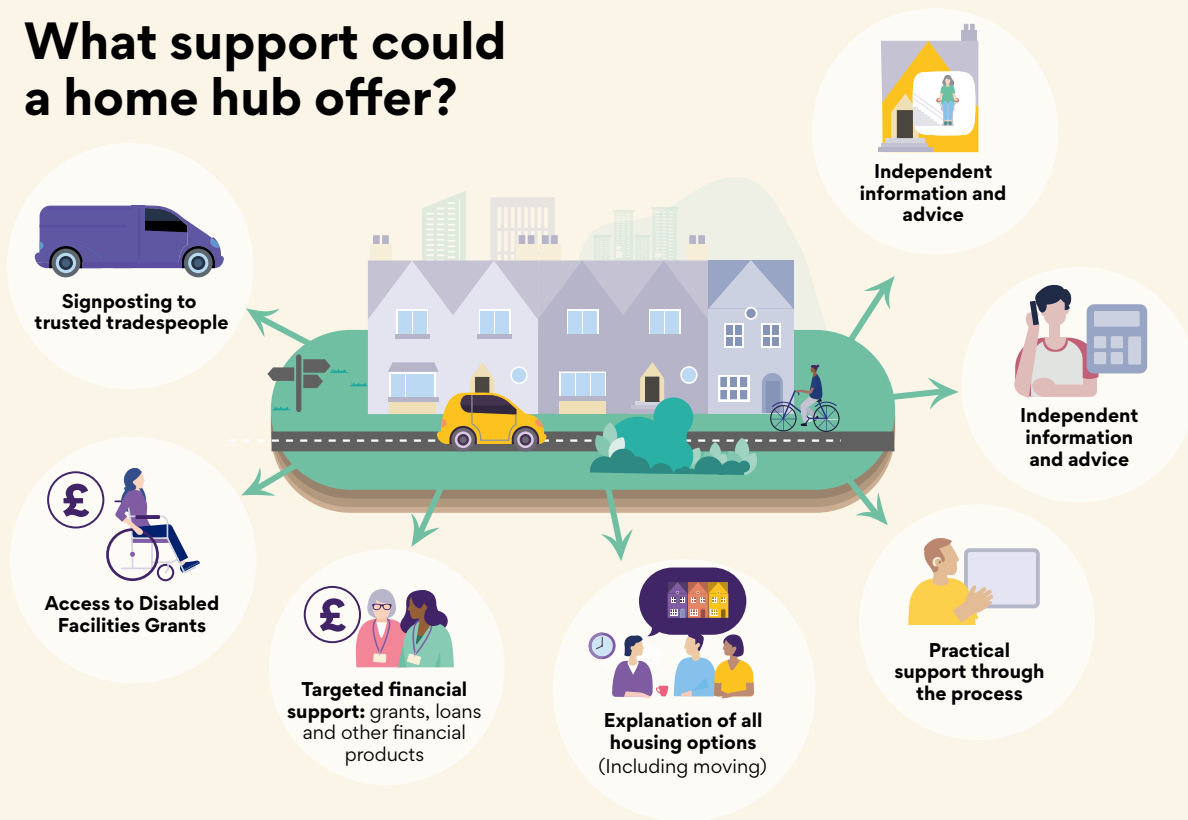
Comprehensive services: Good Home Hubs

In 2020, the Centre for Ageing Better conducted research with people living in poor-quality homes to understand what services would need to be in place locally for all residents to be able to repair, maintain and adapt their homes (see the Good Home Inquiry report).

In an ideal scenario, support would be there for all those who need it: those who cannot afford to pay for the repairs, those who can pay but need support to manage the process and others who only need some online information and advice.

From this engagement and discussion with a large number of other stakeholders, we were able to define a vision for a comprehensive home improvement service. We call this a Good Home Hub. These services should be offered as a one-stop-shop, with organisations connected to make interactions with more than one service as easy as possible for residents.

What support could a home hub offer?



Mapping current service provision

A survey of home improvement services

In order to build the evidence as to why we need greater investment home improvement services, the Centre for Ageing Better has commissioned research into existing services. The research is being conducted by a consortium on behalf of The Centre for Ageing Better and is led by the Centre for Regional and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University working with Foundations, BRE, University of Stirling and the Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence.

In this report, we present the findings of a survey conducted in early 2024 to understand more about existing home improvement services. 27 responses were received, a response rate of approximately 10% of home improvement services across England. 25 were from local authorities – a mix of county, city, district and borough – and two were independent home improvement agencies or charities. All respondents were based in England and nearly all the figures provided are for one year of the service.

The research team have also conducted an extensive evaluation of eight comprehensive home improvement services. The evaluation explored their effectiveness and aims to create shareable learning as to the services' impact on individuals, systems and society. These findings will be published in early 2025.



The postcode lottery in available support

There is significant variation in what is available to residents.

Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) are a statutory duty and are therefore provided by all local authorities to those who meet nationally set eligibility criteria. All of the organisations who responded to this survey, except two, provide DFGs for their residents.

Beyond DFGs, the services offered began to vary significantly. 69% provided hospital discharge support,

62% initiatives to improve the warmth or energy efficiency and 54% a handyman service. For elements such as information and advice and loans to low-income homeowners, the number fell to 38% and 31% respectively. The majority offered six or less of the services listed in Figure 1 but five organisations offered all or nearly all of them (9-12 of the services listed in Figure 1).

These services may be available to residents through another local organisation. However, discussions with stakeholders suggest that this is often not the case and that, even where they are offered, they may not be well connected locally, meaning that it is difficult for residents to navigate between services.

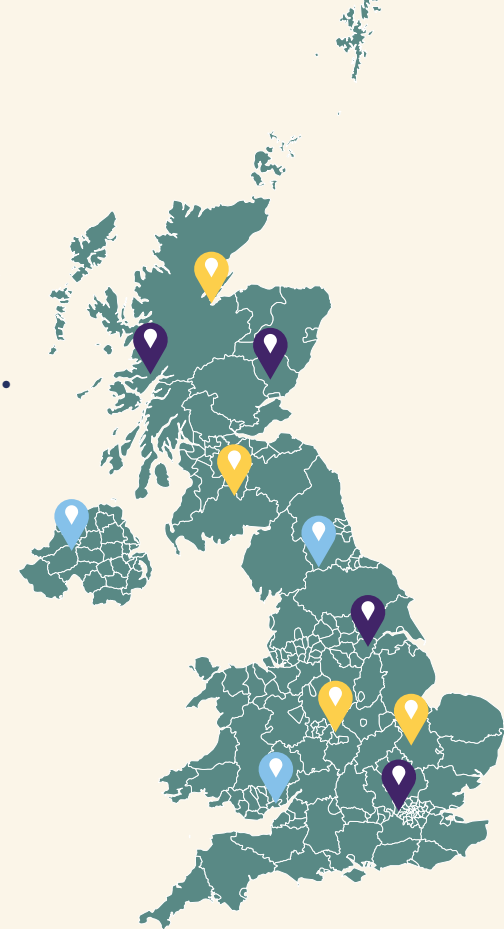
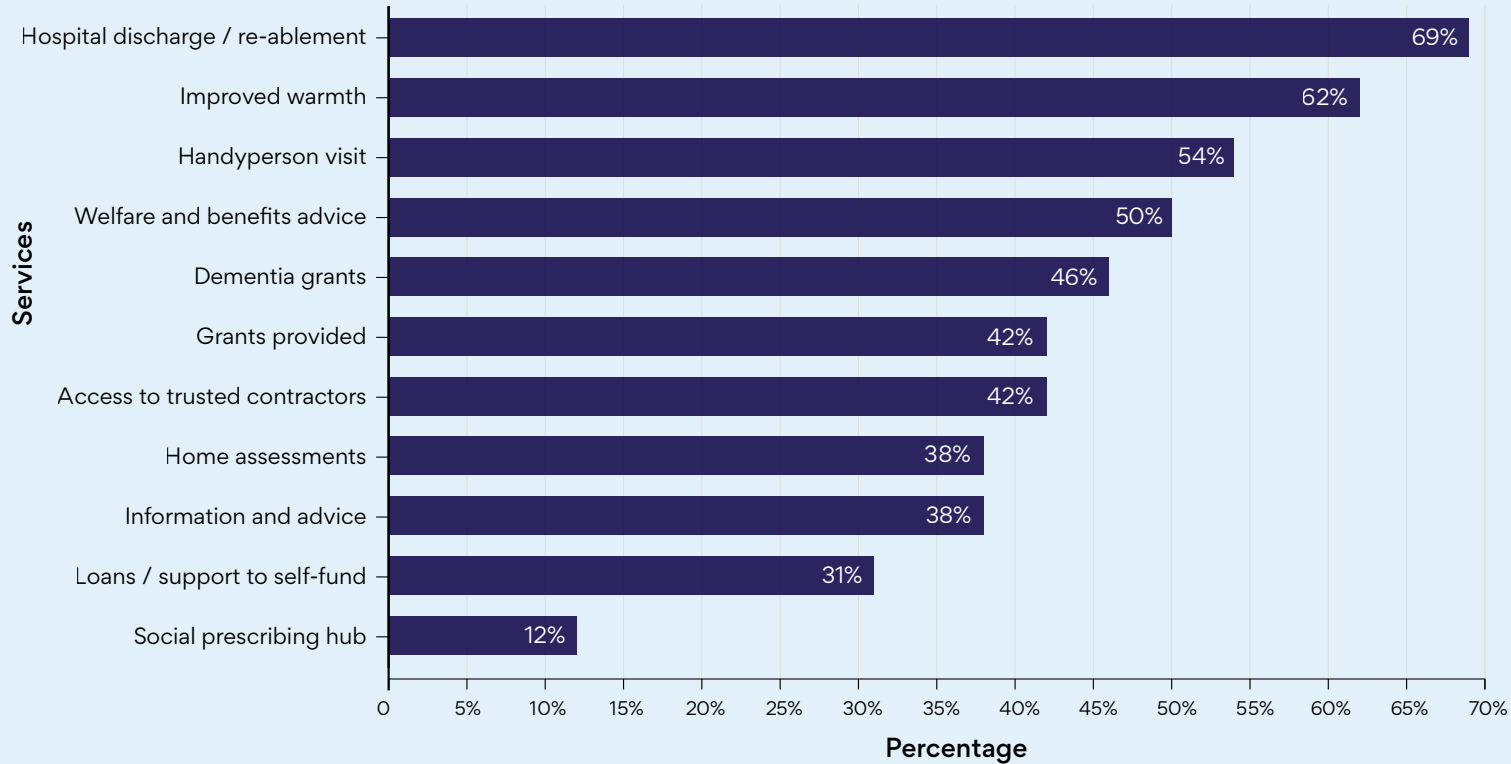


Figure 1: Percentage who offer one of the following services



Available funding

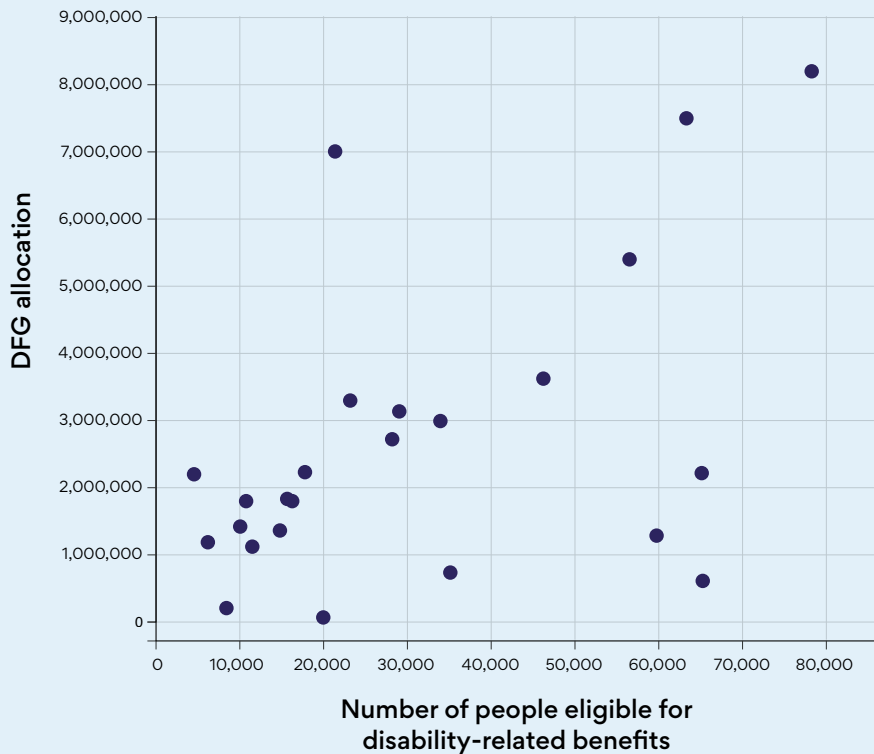
Funding is the most important consideration when understanding why there is such a postcode lottery in terms of home improvement support across England.

Currently the only core funding all existing home improvement services receive is for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The government provides ring-fenced DFG funding to local housing authorities through the Better Care Fund, and then the money is available to people as capital grants to contribute to the cost of adaptations to the home. Eligibility is set by national government and there are restrictions on what the grant can be used to provide, primarily for aids and adaptations.

Figure 2 shows that DFG funding broadly increases with local need (estimated here by the number of adults receiving a disability benefit in the local area) but there are outliers. Half of the organisations receive less than £2 million in DFG funding but the number of people locally who might need support to adapt their home varies significantly.



Figure 2: Disabled Facilities Grant allocation compared to local need



Notes: N = 26. The number of people eligible for disability-related benefits combines those in receipt of Personal Independent Plans, Attendance Allowance or Disabled Living Allowance. This local authority-level data is available online through the Department for Work and Pensions' Stat-Xplore service. Source: Survey conducted for Centre for Ageing Better in 2024.

Expanding budgets beyond aids and adaptations

Beyond Disabled Facilities Grant funding, organisations' funding varies for a number of reasons.

Additional spend varied from £73,000 to £13 million, with an average of £1.8 million. When compared with levels of non-decency in the local area – used here as a proxy for need – there was little correlation. In three areas that have around 20,000 non-decent homes, the local home improvement services spent between £3-£10 million on services other than DFGs.



Bids for energy

Some areas will have had successful national or regional bids for energy efficiency funding (one of the few national initiatives investing in homes outside the social rent sector).



Local contracts

Some will have won local contracts to deliver, for example, hospital discharge services.



Political decisions

Political decisions locally mean that other funding priorities have been made.



Other services

There may be other services available locally in the private or voluntary sector.

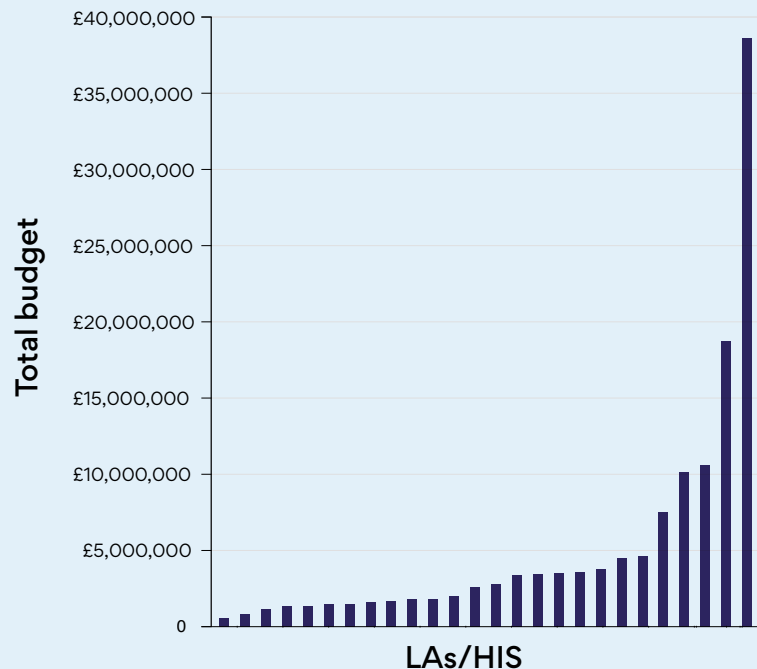
The mismatch of funding vs need

What this research shows, and is widely accepted in the sector, is that levels of funding for home improvement services rarely match levels of need. Local authorities are operating with such extreme funding constraints that unenviable decisions need to be made about what to prioritise.

Combining all income sources including Disabled Facilities Grants, total budgets ranged from £800,000 to £18 million, most commonly spending around £2.8 million.



Figure 3: Total budget



Notes: N = 26, budgets including Disabled Facilities Grants and all other sources of income.
Source: survey conducted for Centre for Ageing Better in 2024

Sourcing additional funding

Nearly half of the organisations received large amounts of funding from energy efficiency /warm homes programmes.

Energy efficiency programmes are often nationally or regionally funded. This demonstrates the impact of national-level commitment and investment to an outcome, in this case reducing the country's carbon emissions and levels of fuel poverty.

The survey also illustrates the diversity of funding from within local authorities where available. Respondents estimated that around £5 million of their funding came from their own financial reserves and an additional £8 million from other departments, such as social care, or from grants won.

Energy efficiency
/warm homes



£16,904,899

Other local
authority funding



£8,174,379

Own financial
contributions



£5,204,194

Over 70,000 services were delivered

The organisations who participated in this survey made homes safer places to live for tens of thousands of people.

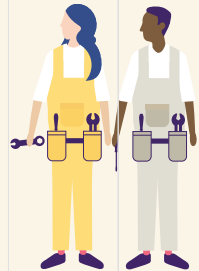
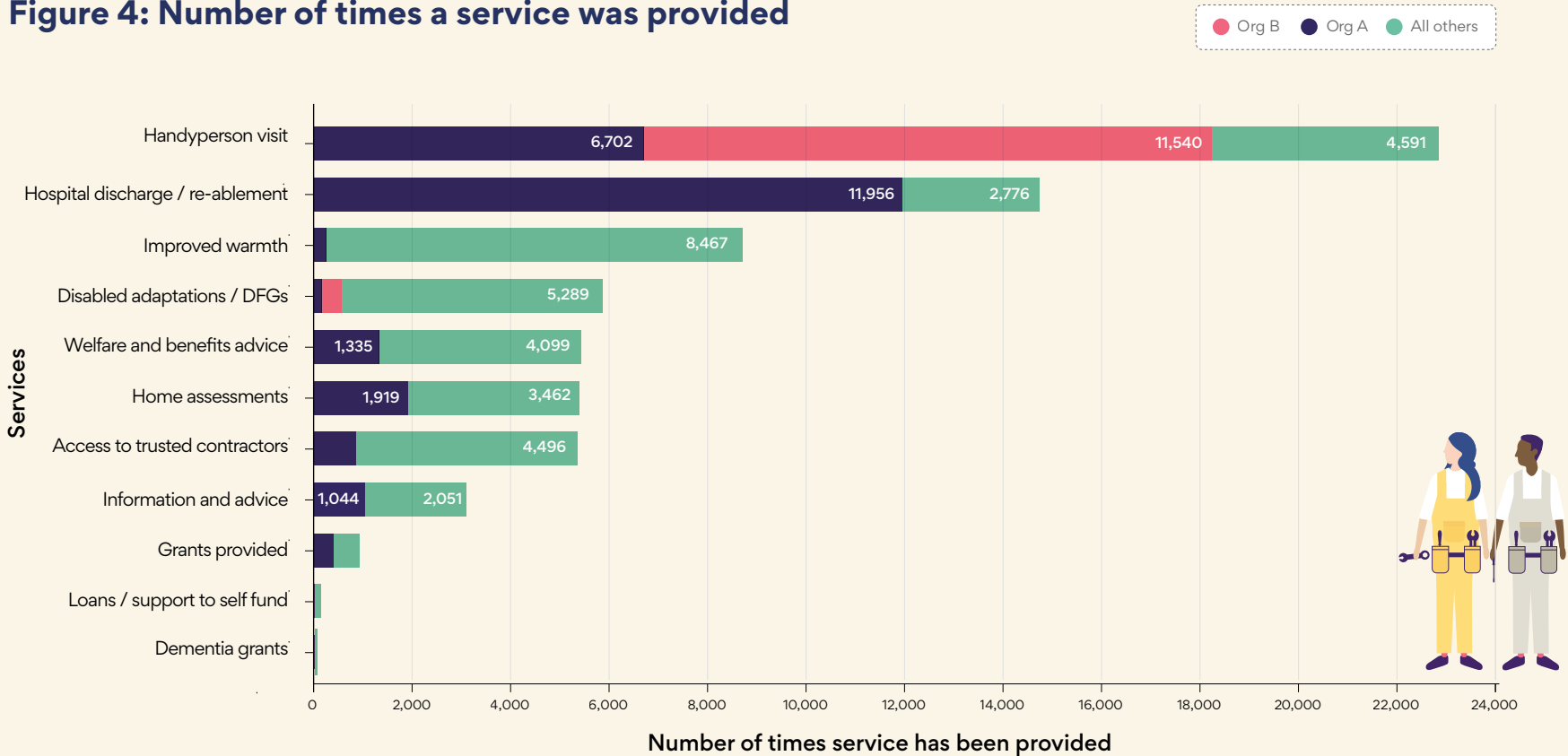
Figure 4 illustrates the number of services delivered by the home improvement organisations who took part in this service over one year. The graph highlights two of the larger organisations to demonstrate the range in scale and delivery of respondents. For example, over 20,000 handyman visits were delivered across the year, the majority by these two organisations. One also

has a focus on hospital discharge and a contractual relationship with their local NHS service.

The third and fourth most common services reflect national funding sources: supporting homes to improve their energy efficiency and warmth, and the provision of adaptations as part of Disabled Facilities Grants.



Figure 4: Number of times a service was provided



Staff

Larger home improvement services are able to hire more specialised staff.

Unsurprisingly, the difference in funding also leads to variance in number of staff employed by each organisation and therefore, how many households they support each year. The survey responses showed that the scale in the number of staff hired can range from 5 to 30, with 38% reporting having less than 10 staff.

This large variance in employees also means that the roles in-house are extremely diverse across different organisations, with some of the bigger services being able to hire more specialised staff such as in-house Occupational Therapists.



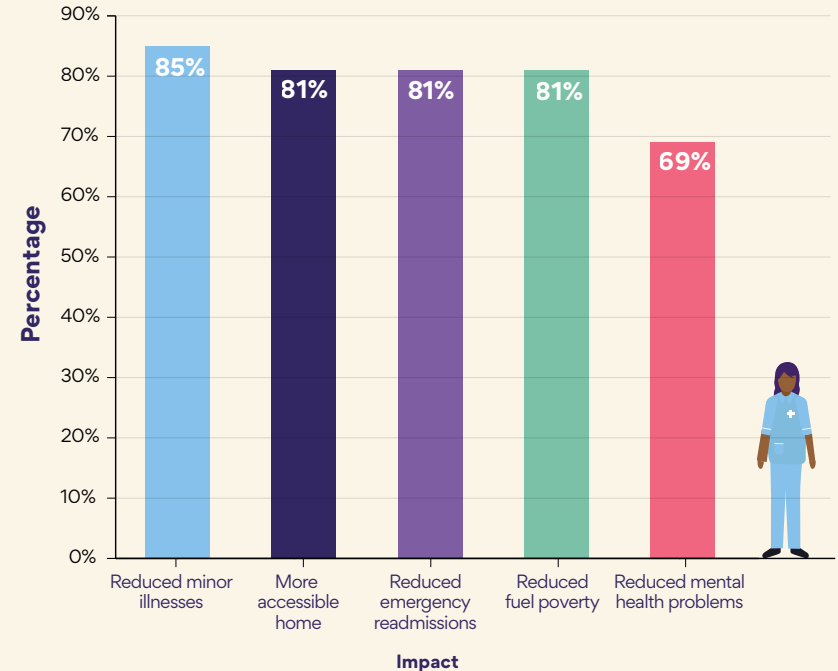
Impact

Improved health, more accessible homes, greater financial security

There is clear evidence that unsafe, damp and cold homes have an impact on our health. As illustrated here, the majority of respondents felt that they had improved their residents' physical and mental health and reduced emergency readmissions. The majority also thought they had improved fuel poverty for many service users.

In early 2025, as part of our evaluation of eight existing home improvement services, Ageing Better will be publishing further evidence regarding the impact of existing services.

Figure 5: Percentage of organisations who report this as a result of their service



Notes: N=26.

Source: survey conducted for Centre for Ageing Better in 2024

Demand expected to increase

It is expected that funding will not keep pace with increased levels of demand.

The results from our survey state that 21% of respondents expect their funding will decrease in the next three years, with 54% expecting it to stay the same and just 25% stating they expect it will increase a little.

Within the same period that funding is expected to stay the same or decrease over the next three years, 78% of respondents expect the number of households needing support will increase within the same period – with 39% expecting demand to increase by over 20%.

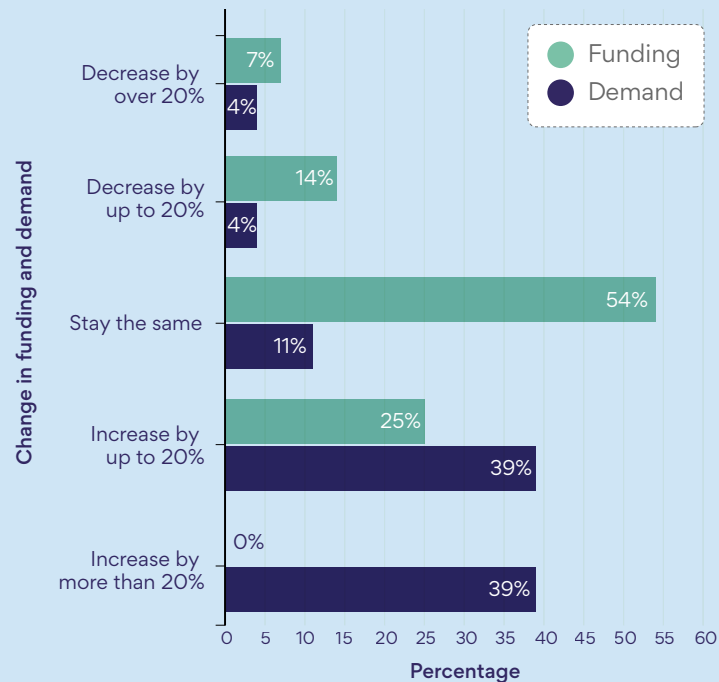


Figure 6: Expectations of demand and funding increases/decreases

Notes: N=27.

Source: survey conducted for Centre for Ageing Better in 2023

Comprehensive home improvement services



The survey demonstrate how the large variance in funding and service offer has led to a postcode lottery in support for home improvements.

Despite the challenges, there are a small number of local areas that have been able to prioritise home improvement services and are able to provide their local community with an extensive and comprehensive service much like the Good Home Hub model (page 4). These services show the art of what is possible when sufficiently funded.

In early 2025, the Centre for Ageing Better will be publishing an evaluation of eight of these large home improvement services. The evaluation will measure their effectiveness and create shareable learning as to their impact on individuals, systems and society. The following four slides are profiles of two existing home improvement services included in the evaluation.



CASE STUDY 1

Bridging boroughs: an urban charity's efforts to improve housing in North-West England

Case Study 1 is an independent charity in the north-west of England. It is funded through the city council but provides some services that span across local authority boundaries into neighbouring boroughs. The locality is largely made up of urban spaces. 19% of homes are non-decent, this is higher than the national average of 17%.

Funding

Core funding: £600,000 of Disabled Facilities Grant funding

Additional funding: £500,000 from other local authority funding and £400,000 from health service funding

Impact

“ *‘[The service provides] people you can turn to really. I think it’s when you don’t have control, when you don’t know what to do. It helps having that extra somebody to rely on.’*

Service user (2024)

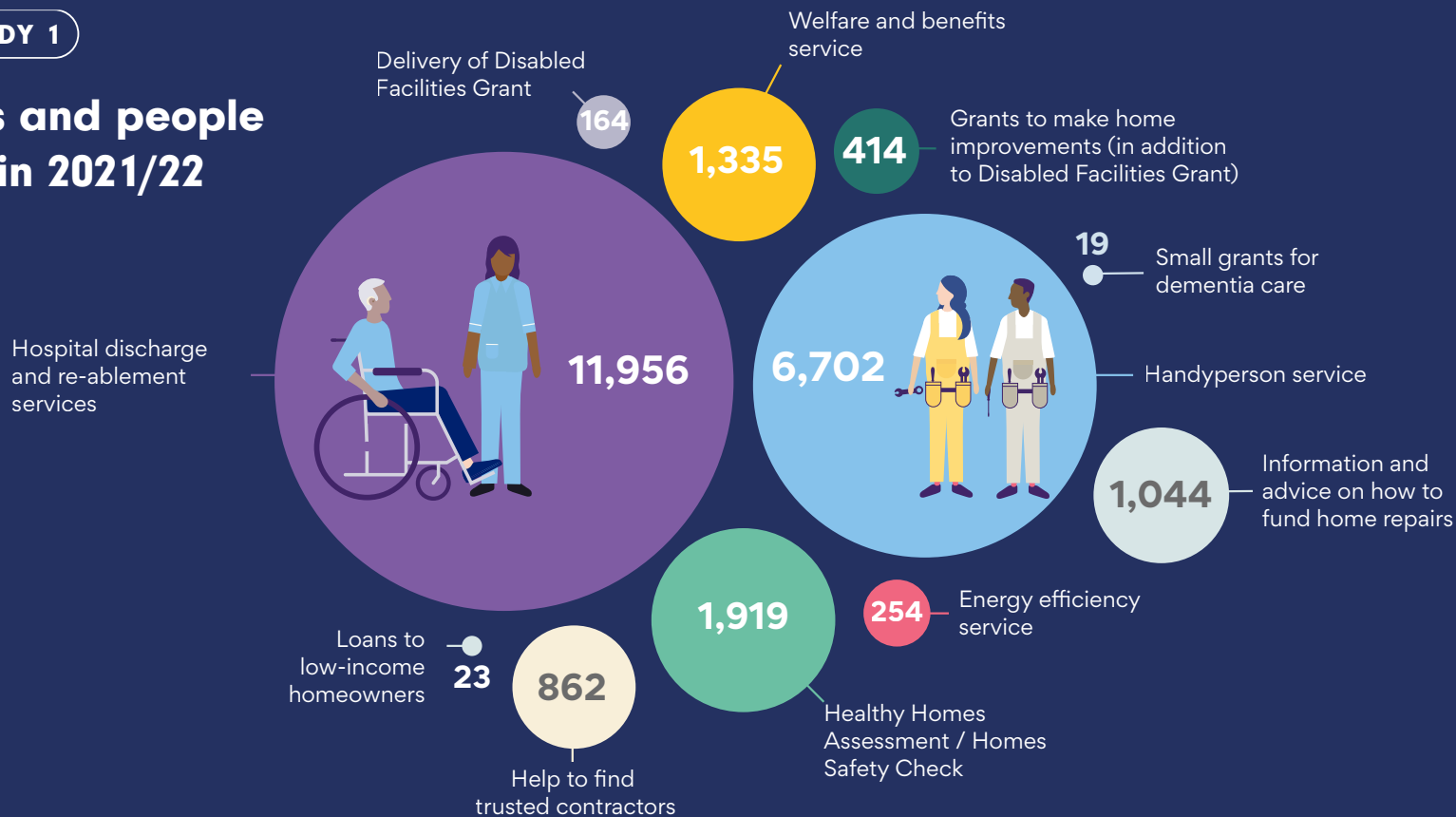
Staff

The service has a staffing budget of £750,000 per annum and employs:

- 7 managers
- 23 delivery staff
- 5.3 handypersons
- 5.8 administrative staff

CASE STUDY 1

Services and people helped in 2021/22



CASE STUDY 2

Home improvement service in North-East England

Case study 2 is a home improvement service in the north-east of England. It is part of a local authority and sits within the Adult Social Care directorate. The locality is a unitary authority and a predominantly urban area. 15% of dwellings are considered ‘non-decent’ as of 2019 which is below the national average of 16%.



Funding

Core funding: £2.2 million of DFG funding
Additional funding: £400,000 from other local authority funding and £200,000 of their own funds

Staff

The service has a staffing budget of £500,000 per annum and employs:

- 4 managers
- 9 delivery staff
- 7 handypersons
- 6 administrative staff

Impact

“ *‘[They] helped me get my life back. I was ashamed to have anyone in the property.’*

(Service user, 2024)

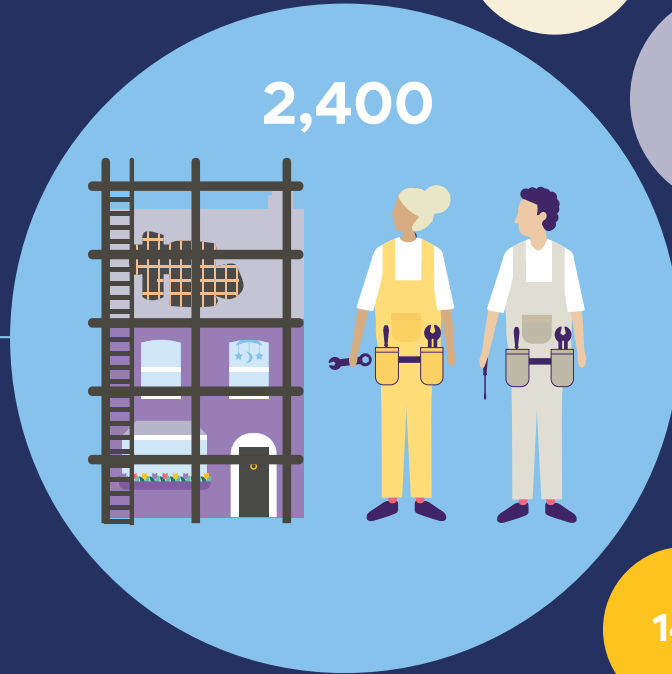
“ *‘Like I say I didn’t realise [all the services] were combined like this and it certainly does make a difference once you’re assessed and everything, it goes on from there. Everyone knows what each other is doing basically. As I say it’s really really good. I wouldn’t hesitate if I needed anything to just ring them.’*

(Service user, 2024)

CASE STUDY 2

Services and people helped in 2022/23

Handyperson and home repair service



183

Hospital discharge and re-ablement service

262

Delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants

241

Energy efficiency service

30

Support to find trusted contractors

146

Information and advice on how to fund home repairs

We need immediate action

For those living in unsafe, cold and damp homes, the impact on their health, finances and quality of life is far too great to ignore.

This report has highlighted that without intervention from national government, demand is set to further outweigh funding.

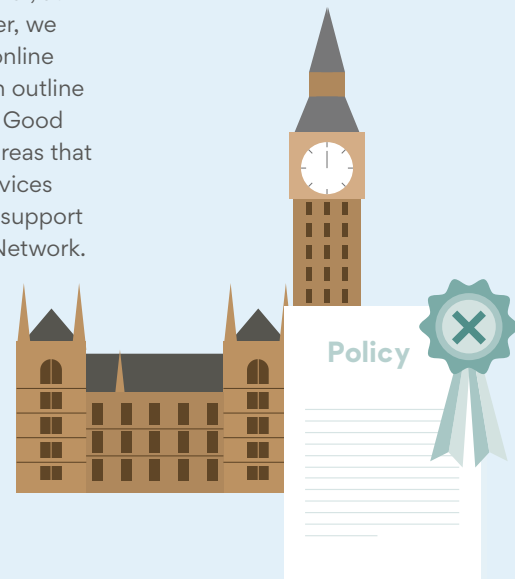
The Centre for Ageing Better is calling on the UK government to **develop a national strategy to fix cold and dangerous homes that are damaging people's health.**

This should set out detailed plans to improve poor-quality homes of all tenure types across England and bring together work on housing from multiple government departments. It must be backed by sufficient, long-term funding and include a

mechanism to improve the existing offers of support and mechanisms for delivery at a local level, such as **Good Home Hubs.**

In addition, local government should provide local **one-stop shops for all aspects of home repairs and adaptations**, with support on everything from finding trusted tradespeople and identifying what work needs to be done, to how to finance repairs and improve energy efficiency. This is what we call the **Good Home Hub.**

For local areas or organisations interested in learning more from those who have managed to expand their home improvement offer, at the Centre for Ageing Better, we have created a number of online resources. These include an outline process towards creating a Good Home Hub, learning from areas that have implemented new services and learning from our peer support network, the Good Home Network.



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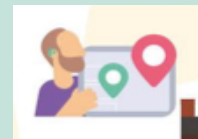
What support could a home hub offer?

① Independent information and advice



③ Explanation of all housing options (including moving)

② Practical support through the process

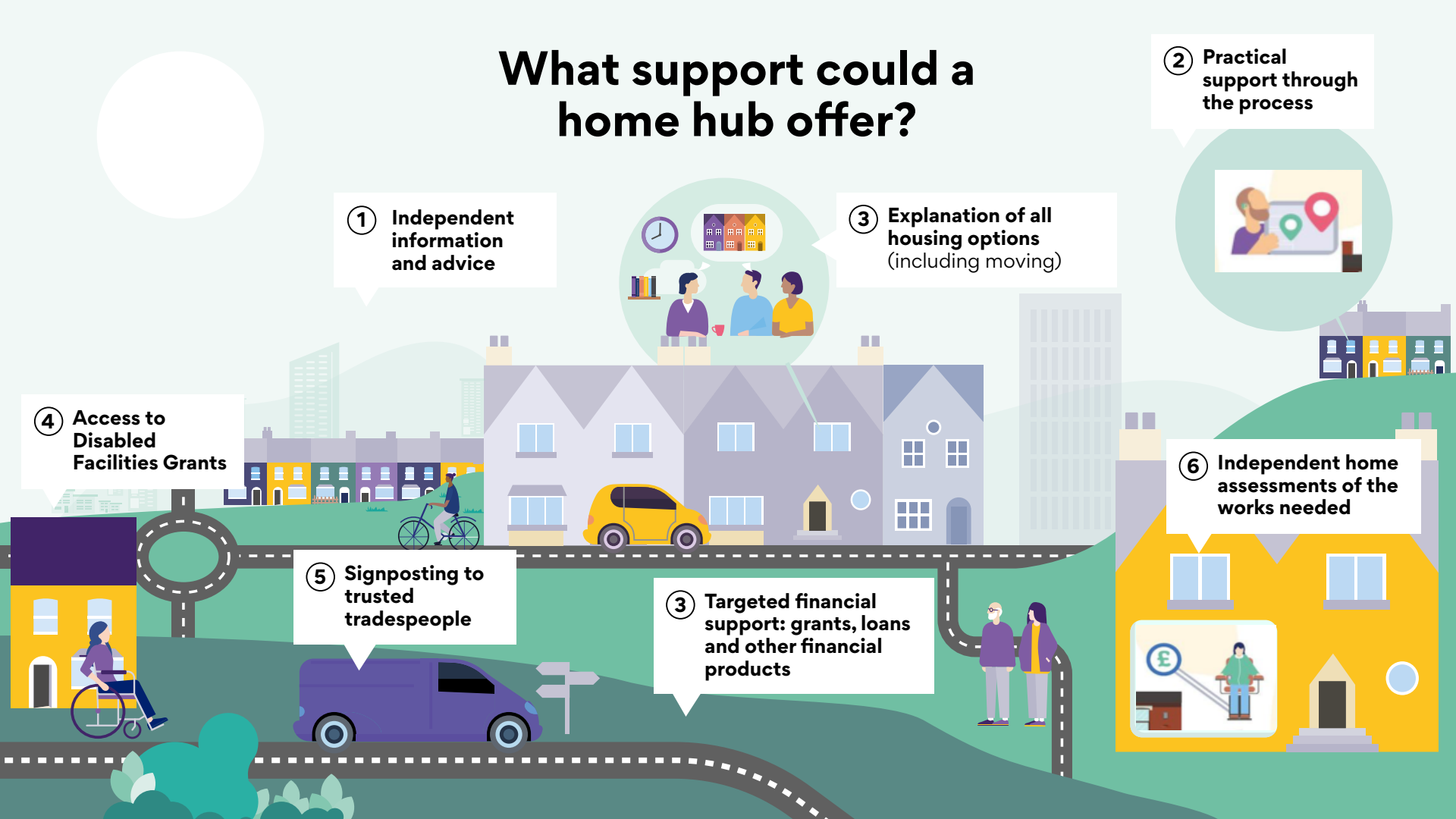
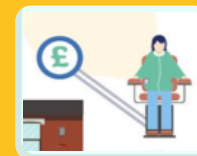


④ Access to Disabled Facilities Grants

⑤ Signposting to trusted tradespeople

③ Targeted financial support: grants, loans and other financial products

⑥ Independent home assessments of the works needed



What support could a home hub offer?



Independent home assessments of the works needed



Independent information and advice



Signposting to trusted tradespeople



Practical support through the process



Access to Disabled Facilities Grants



Targeted financial support: grants, loans and other financial products



Explanation of all housing options (including moving)