

Westminster City Council

Home Adaptations

Report by



City of Westminster

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Executive Summary

- Overall, customers are very happy with the home adaptations process. Any issues and negative comments about the process are greatly outweighed by the overly positive experiences that customers reported.
- A diverse range of customers took part in the research, from infants represented by a parent, to elderly customers. The range of conditions was also extremely varied.
- There is little impression that the bureaucracy and paperwork associated with the home adaptation process causes customers any problems. Often they feel shielded from the administrative side by their Occupational Therapist.
- Customers are kept well informed throughout the process.
- Though customers are given choice over their adaptations work to a degree (e.g. colour and styles), at a micro level, there were complaints that the home adaptations work had not been carried out with a great enough level of personalisation. For example, one customer reported that their dominant hand side had not been taken into consideration with the fitting of hand rails, and another that bathroom fittings were not at the correct height.
- Customers are often hesitant to complain. Though they would sometimes like to make complaints, they are often so grateful for the work, that they feel this would be discourteous.
- For Housing Association customers, there is sometimes a feeling of a lack of completion if a minor complaint is made; it is not as easy to get snags resolved as it is for council and private customers. Having a complaint resolved can be reliant on having a good relationship with the Housing Association manager.

Introduction

Background

The Research and Customer Insight (RCI) team commissioned ESRO to carry out a series of face-to-face interviews with Westminster residents who have had home adaptations carried out within the past year. The study aimed better to understand customers' experiences, and also to judge their levels of satisfaction with the adaptations work carried out. Although the research incorporated elements of a traditional 'yes/no' questionnaire format, the emphasis was on gaining a deeper understanding of customer perception than that provided by such methods alone. The aim was for rich qualitative insight into both process and outcomes, which can be taken forward to improve services in the future.

Objectives

The key objective of the study was to improve WCC's understanding of both customer satisfaction and customer wellbeing among home adaptations customers – with a view ultimately to improving satisfaction with and the performance of adaptations for disabled people. A further objective was to determine if there are differences in customer experience depending on if customers were Housing Association (HA), council, or private residents. Given that different HAs operate in Westminster, we also sought to reveal potential differences between different HAs.

Methodology

The preparatory phases of the research were handled by the RCI team. This involved the recruitment of a mix of private, council and housing association residents, and the scheduling of appointments with ESRO interviewers. Ahead of these meetings, the RCI team devised a topic guide and quantitative questionnaire as a prompt for the interviews. These materials included a series of directly comparable questions – with respondents asked to pinpoint their responses on a scale of 1 to 5 – focusing specifically on customers' satisfaction and their health and wellbeing. Over the course of four days in late February and early March, ESRO conducted 17 face-to-face interviews

with home adaptations customers (some with their carers present), covering a range of resident types and different home adaptations. The interviews included five HA, eight council, and four private customers. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour and began by refreshing the customer's memory of the process by asking them to think through the various stages (who recommended what and when; who was the key contact; which organisation handled each part of the adaptation) and recording these details in a process flow chart.

The second part of each meeting used the topic guide and questionnaire as a basis for further discussion, with particular attention given to customer satisfaction: what was good, what was bad and what aspects of home adaptations could be improved in future.

Research Findings

Understanding the audience

There was a huge diversity of individuals (symptoms, severities, life stages, living situations, support) encompassed by the 'target audience' for home adaptations.

The range of conditions encountered included:

- Children born disabled or with a genetic condition (e.g. autism, blindness).
- Individuals with rapid-onset conditions or whose needs have changed as a result of accident (e.g. stroke, heart attack).
- Adults with conditions that result in a long term progressive decline (e.g. some forms of MS, Parkinson's, cancer etc.).
- Older individuals with age-related mobility issues or dementia.

Beyond the functional support of the adaptations, attitudes and abilities to 'cope' with conditions varied significantly:

- Some individuals have come to terms with their condition taking a somewhat philosophical 'c'est la vie' attitude.
- Others are more openly resentful, frustrated and even angry at their situation and the 'unfairness' of their experience.

Attitudes to receiving help and support

Individuals have a mixed attitude to 'asking for help' and receiving support to help with their condition (or the condition of the individual whom they care for)

"I don't like asking people to come when I have Tommy here all the time."

Some are eager and enthusiastic for help, seeking out opportunities to receive extra support and are aware of the life-changing benefit that even small changes can make.

Others are far more reticent about receiving help or have simply grown accustomed to the struggle of completing everyday tasks.

This attitude to 'receiving help' and awareness of the impact that small changes can make to quality of life, can influence an individual's reaction to the home adaptations process.

- Some have received lots of help already, and are enthusiastic about (perhaps even somewhat accustomed to) the benefits that home adaptation can bring.
- Others may find the experience of receiving 'disability affirming' help and home adaptation distressing and see it as moving them further away from 'normality'.

Initial perceptions of the adaptations process

Across the sample, individuals initially thought that the process of receiving a home adaptation was likely to be stressful, longwinded and time consuming.

Many had concerns about the quality of the building work and 'institutional' feel of the building materials that would be used.

Some expressed fears about disruption to their caring routines and lives during building works (e.g. concern about long periods with no washing facilities etc.).

The actual experience

Overall, most respondents were genuinely pleased with how well the process worked – spontaneously describing the experience with terms such as 'a real pleasure', 'incredibly efficient' and 'first class'. As one respondent put it:

'I can't speak too highly of them: the way they dealt with me, and the consideration, and how courteous they were. In this day and age, that's unusual, you know? Especially when you're getting older.'

However, the majority of those taking part in the research had limited awareness of the exact detail of their entitlements and the specifics of the process at each stage of the installation.

- Most see it as a 'council' or 'housing association' process, which they instigate by contacting the council and is then 'owned' by the council from that point.
- Most rely on their 'assessment' and the word of the 'assessor' to understand to what they are entitled.
- Beyond 'the council', few have specific awareness of the exact nature of the different organisations that may be involved in the process (e.g. Dependability, Social Services etc.)

Lack of detailed understanding about the process did not undermine the positivity of individual experiences. In fact, a more detailed understanding may have added unnecessary and unwanted complexity to proceedings.

A notable majority of individuals who had received an adaptation described it as a necessary and positive experience by:

- Having a significant impact on their (and their carer's) regular quality of life
- Improving their living conditions
- Reducing stress and strain in completing essential tasks

"It's as if he has more energy and more life after a hot shower."

"Psychology is a big factor with her condition. Any tension can be a real problem. The more relaxed everything can become, the fewer attacks she has. It has made a big impact."

The customer journey

Despite the recentness of their involvement in the process – much of which often had happened less than 6 - 8 months previously – most respondents could remember little detail about the specific process.

- Often the detail relating to specific forms, communications and individuals involved in the process had been lost from memory (considered unimportant or inconsequential).
- Given the ‘negativity bias’ (tendency for individuals to have a greater propensity to remember negative events) this probably correlates with the positive experience that most respondents enjoyed (i.e. there were no significant negative events to stay in their long term memory).

Additionally, for a number of those in the sample, the whole process was perceived to be mediated (instigated, assessed and monitored) by an Occupational Therapist who was felt to ‘shield’ the individual from bureaucracy and difficulty.

As the table overleaf shows, individuals describe a customer journey in terms of six broad stages:

Stage	Customer Understanding of Stage	Customer Experience	Quotes
Stage 1: Occupational Therapist – Needs Assessment	The majority already had a relationship with an Occupational Therapist (often the OT recognised the need or opportunity for adaptation)	<p>OTs are well-liked and thought to be professional, helpful and considerate</p> <p>Currently OTs' main input appears to be instigating the process; they are not really involved during the implementation stage</p> <p>Those with the best relationship with their OTs felt 'shielded' from bureaucracy and potential stress</p>	<i>'My OT was very, very good... they look to the future.'</i>
Stage 2: Surveyor – Site Survey	Surveyor is engaged (from the council) to assess the scope of the adaptation and identify possible options	<p>Surveyors were felt to be prompt, professional and all practicalities were communicated clearly</p> <p>The needs of individuals and carers were felt to have been taken into account</p> <p>Surveyors were easy to get in contact with, often prompting the need for communication rather than having to be chased</p> <p>The majority of customers felt informed throughout</p>	<i>'The Westminster surveyor was easy to communicate with and always responded to emails appropriately.'</i>
Stage 3: Surveyor – Options and Choices	Surveyor presents the option(s) for the alteration and the individual is consulted about whether they want to go ahead	<p>Often individuals described a slight feeling of having lacked options or the ability to 'personalise' the adaptation. At this point, individuals are mostly thinking in terms of aesthetics (colours, styles, finish)</p> <p>It later emerges, however, that tailoring according to individual physical needs becomes important</p> <p>For the minority who investigate alternative ways of implementing the adaptations (e.g. private options), the council-led choices are felt to be comparable with those available on the wider market</p>	<i>'I wasn't aware that there might be options – nor was I told whether there would be a chair in the shower or not. Or the size of the door... or the flooring.'</i>

Stage	Customer Understanding of Stage	Customer Experience	Quotes
Stage 4: Builders Implement Plan	Builders implement the plan and make necessary adaptations	<p>The majority of respondents have only the highest praise for the builders – describing them as exemplary and setting a high standard for respect and workmanship</p> <p>Builders clearly communicated timescales, timetabling and delays</p> <p>Typically workmen were polite, respectful and communicative</p> <p>Homes were left clean and consideration was given as to how individuals would manage to live a normal life during the building work</p>	<i>I think the young man almost came in the shower with me (He was fully clothed!)</i>
Stage 5: Assessor Checks Work	Builders implement the plan and make necessary adaptations	<p>Assessors were generally felt to be prompt, polite and professional</p> <p>Individuals are often uncertain as to what this person's role is and what impact they have on the process</p>	<i>'Dependability phoned to ask if I was happy – I replied that of course I was!'</i>
Stage 6: Snagging	Any problems with the building work identified and rectified	<p>This is often the stage that is felt to be most stressful and perhaps least efficient</p> <p>Niggles and snags can be difficult to iron out (this is perhaps more pertinent for housing association residents)</p>	<i>'They've been back a few times – it's still not quite right, but I don't want to moan.'</i>

Outcomes and impacts

Individuals do describe real and significant changes to their lives. For many, the impact is far greater than they had foreseen given their acclimatisation to completing the task prior to the adaptation and the perceived insignificance of the change.

'I wouldn't want to be without them [shower and central heating] now – I'd cry!'

Changes described include:

- Greater freedom and empowerment – a real sense of recovering something of their 'former life'
- Privacy and dignity – the ability to complete basic but important everyday tasks independent of help (e.g. personal hygiene)
- Reduced strain – diminished stress on both the individual and the carer; a sense of reduced burden
- Widening of horizons – some adaptations have proved a real life-changer

However, given the nature of the adaptations researched, it could not be expected that they would have a transformative effect on an individual's need for care. Few cited any real reduction in the number of hours of care needed – Carers are often pressed for time anyway, and simply move to the 'next job on the list'.

Areas of dissatisfaction

The overriding reaction to receiving a home adaptation was gratitude and a feeling of appreciation that such changes were facilitated in a convenient manner.

Most individuals felt that highlighting any kind of problem or dissatisfaction went against their good feelings and thanks. As such, **most felt uneasy with the idea of making a complaint** – even when parts of the adaptation hadn't turned out as they had hoped.

“When it went wrong initially, but 'I don't think that was any person's fault. It's just the thing with technology... [the] manufacturer's fault.”

“I didn't want to complain. In fact there was no way I would have complained. They did a huge amount of work for me and have made a real difference to my life. I was very grateful. I feel humble I suppose, you don't want to seem ungrateful.”

Despite this, when asked if they had ever had to make a complaint, over half (53%) of customers said they had made some kind of complaint. However, the complaints made were mostly related to teething problems with new equipment, and were resolved relatively easily. No major or serious complaints about the level of service were made.

It is worth emphasising that all of those in the sample had been happy with the process and did feel positive about the impact the adaptation had on their lives.

Lack of personalisation

Overall, it was sometimes felt that the home adaptations process, whilst streamlined and efficient, lacked sufficient ability to be personalised to an individual's specific needs:

- Individuals were consulted in broad terms about options and choices at the start of the process.
- However, individuals could not foresee (and had no opportunity to

affect) smaller details which could significantly impact upon their experience of using the adaptation

“I don’t think any options were given to us. They just told us what would be done. But no one discussed options with us.”

Specific examples of the lack of personalisation include:

- Exact placement of handrails and ways of manoeuvring within and around a space
- Access to storage space
- Handedness (e.g. shower controls placed on the right or left hand which made them very difficult to use for someone with one-sided paralysis from stroke)

“It’s much better but the reality is that for my condition the handrails are not quite in the right place and I struggle to brush my teeth in the sink because I have no place to put my weight.”

Impact on carers

For some carers, adaptations left them with unanticipated consequences. For example, many regularly prioritised the needs of the individual they cared for on a daily basis and saw the adaptation as an essential part of improving that person’s care. However, adaptations could sometimes negatively impact upon the carer’s quality of life (especially if they are a live-in carer i.e. relative):

- For example, removing a bathtub could deprive a carer of an ‘everyday luxury’ they had previously taken for granted
- Or replacing a shower unit could result in a switch from a previously powerful and hot shower to a less powerful and colder shower

Differences between private, council and HA residents

As previously discussed, as well as looking at the customer experience for customers as a whole, this project also has the aim of revealing any potential differences in the service between different resident types (HA, council and private). Given the small sample size and number of respondents, it is not possible to draw out any statistically reliable conclusions, however, throughout the research several findings did emerge, notably concerning HA customers.

The customer experience for council and private residents, from an end user perspective appears to be relatively similar. The only difference encountered was that one private customer had shopped around to see if the adaptations work could be carried out through another provider for a better rate.

For HA customers, there were small areas of difference. As previously mentioned, it was assumed that being a HA customer would involve an extra level of bureaucracy, however, from this research, it appears this was not the case.

Perhaps the only area where HA customers can be seen to receive a poorer service than their council and private counterparts is with the complaints procedure. There is feeling that a successful complaint is more likely if the customer knows their HA manager. Further, with HA customers, there was a sense that when complaints were made, there wasn't necessarily much sense of follow-up.

Appendix - Performance

		Percentage
Your carers were considered when the assessment of your needs was carried out	Strongly agree	41%
	Tend to agree	6%
	Neither agree nor disagree	18%
	Tend to disagree	12%
	Strongly disagree	6%
	Blank	18%
	Summary: Agree	47%
	Summary: Disagree	18%
You were clear about the persons who were dealing with your adaptation and you were able to contact them easily if you had a question	Strongly agree	65%
	Tend to agree	12%
	Neither agree nor disagree	12%
	Tend to disagree	6%
	Strongly disagree	0%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	77%
	Summary: Disagree	6%
They were clear about what works we going to be completed	Strongly agree	47%
	Tend to agree	41%
	Neither agree nor disagree	0%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	6%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	88%
	Summary: Disagree	6%
They made it clear when the work contractors would call	Strongly agree	59%
	Tend to agree	24%
	Neither agree nor disagree	0%
	Tend to disagree	12%
	Strongly disagree	0%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	83%
	Summary: Disagree	12%

They kept you updated on how long your home adaptation would take to be carried out	Strongly agree	29%
	Tend to agree	47%
	Neither agree nor disagree	12%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	6%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	76%
	Summary: Disagree	6%
They completed the work in good time	Strongly agree	59%
	Tend to agree	24%
	Neither agree nor disagree	6%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	6%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	83%
	Summary: Disagree	6%
The workers were polite and professional	Strongly agree	76%
	Tend to agree	18%
	Neither agree nor disagree	0%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	0%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	94%
	Summary: Disagree	0%
Overall, the work was of a high quality	Strongly agree	65%
	Tend to agree	24%
	Neither agree nor disagree	6%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	0%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Agree	89%
	Summary: Disagree	0%

The workers kept dirt and mess to a minimum	Strongly agree	59%
	Tend to agree	18%
	Neither agree nor disagree	12%
	Tend to disagree	0%
	Strongly disagree	0%
	Blank	12%
	Summary: Agree	77%
	Summary: Disagree	0%

Satisfaction and expectations

Overall, how satisfied are you with the adaptations work recently carried out in your home?	Very satisfied	47%
	Fairly satisfied	35%
	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	0%
	Fairly dissatisfied	12%
	Very dissatisfied	0%
	Blank	6%
	Summary: Satisfied	82%
	Summary: Dissatisfied	12%
Before the work was carried out on your home, what level of service did you expect to receive from the Home Adaptations team?	Very good	18%
	Good	35%
	Neither good nor bad	18%
	Poor	0%
	Very poor	0%
	Blank	29%
	Summary: Good	53%
	Summary: Poor	0%

Now that the work has been completed, would you say that the level of service you actually received has been...	Excellent	59%
	Good	24%
	Neither good nor bad	6%
	Poor	6%
	Very poor	6%
	Blank	0%
	Summary: Good	83%
	Summary: Poor	12%
Have you ever had to make a complaint about any services that you've received in relation to your home adaptation?	Yes	53%
	No	47%

Consultation and informed

How satisfied were you with the information you received about the options available for your home adaptation?	Very satisfied	12%
	Fairly satisfied	35%
	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6%
	Fairly dissatisfied	24%
	Very dissatisfied	6%
	Blank	18%
	Summary: Satisfied	47%
	Summary: Dissatisfied	30%
Did you feel you had any choice about the types of adaptations or modifications you received?	Yes, I chose what I wanted	24%
	Yes, I had some say in what I wanted	24%
	No, what I wanted didn't really affect what I got	18%
	No, there wasn't any real choice	29%

Contact Details

The author has sought to ensure that this report is an accurate reflection of the research and consultation that has taken place. It is therefore important that the findings continue to be accurately reflected in any future internal or external publication. If you wish to reference the findings from this report please contact the authors to ensure that your interpretation is correct.

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