

Support Notes on Commissioner's Advice Housing Costs: Minor Repairs and Improvements

1. Repairs and improvements

No support notes.

2. "Minor"

Factors to consider

Of the three main factors to consider, cost is usually the least reliable. The cost of materials can vary widely between the top and bottom of the market range. And labour costs for the same work can vary even more widely, particularly if you compare "DIY" costs with the costs of employing a contractor. Furthermore, applicants may not always know the exact cost of the work they want done – the figure on the application form may be no more than a guess. For this reason, the Guidance issued by the Secretary of State at paragraph 2301 is helpful: "It is normally the type of work, not the cost, which determines if [the repair or improvement] is minor."

Examples

The following examples are intended to give a broad-brush illustration of the difference between minor and non-minor repairs/improvements. They should not be taken as prescriptive.

- The replacement of a few slates/ tiles is minor compared to the replacement of a whole roof.
- The replacement of a minor part of a central heating boiler (e.g. pump, valves, thermostat control) is a minor repair compared to the replacement of the whole boiler.
- The fitting of single wash basin is minor compared to the provision of a whole bathroom suite.
- The repair/ replacement of a few floorboards is minor compared to the repair/ replacement of unsafe floor joists.
- The fitting of a single spur for an electricity socket is minor compared to the complete re-wiring of a house.

Inspectors will see many repairs/improvements that fall somewhere between the ends of the range illustrated above. These cases will involve more difficult judgments, and more detailed evidence may be necessary about the nature and extent of the work, and the cost. In some cases the balance between materials, labour, and cost could mislead Inspectors, if full details of the work are not obtained. Some in-depth examples of how Inspectors might approach more complex cases follow. However, they should not be taken as prescriptive.

Example 1

Mr E applies for £481 for fencing. Some of his fencing has fallen down, and since then his home has been broken into twice. No further information about the need is before the Inspector.

The Inspector explains in his Statement of Issues that repairs and improvements are excluded unless they are minor. He then asks questions to establish further details about the nature and extent of the work and the cost.

The applicant supplies the following further information: He requires 12 close-boarded fence panels, 5 by 6 foot (£200), 13 concrete posts (£84), 15 bags of concrete post mix (£45), 12 concrete gravel boards (£72), and a skip to dispose of the old fencing (£80). He plans to remove the existing fence panels and posts, and to erect the new fencing by himself. He anticipates that this will take him 5 to 6 days.

The task of removing the existing fencing and erecting 12 fence panels with concrete posts and gravel boards is a considerable one, even for a professional. The job will take some days to complete. The materials and labour, when taken together, mean that the work is not a minor repair/improvement. The amount the applicant requested in his application form, £481, suggests that the work is more minor, than not minor. However, the amount requested can be an unreliable guide. When full details are obtained it becomes clear that the amount requested represents only the cost of the fencing materials and a skip, which are relatively cheap.

Example 2

Mrs H applies for £850 for a toilet and basin. Her present ones were damaged during an incident of domestic violence.

The Inspector makes appropriate enquiries and obtains the following information: The applicant wants £650 for a new toilet and basin. The plumber who is to fit them has estimated that in the bathroom concerned it will be simple to disconnect the old items and to reconnect the new ones, partly because isolation valves have already been fitted to the relevant pipes. He anticipates that the job will take him less than 2 hours. He will charge £200 (inclusive of VAT).

The Inspector looks at the cost of a toilet and basin from stores such as B & Q and discovers that there are many toilet/basin combinations on sale for less than £300, and some for as little as £217.

On the particular facts of this case, the job is a simple one, which is likely to be completed in a very short period. A toilet and basin are relatively small and simple items that can be obtained relatively inexpensively. The fact that Mrs H was seeking items towards the top of the price range should not cloud the Inspector's judgment on the exclusion. It is suggested that in this particular case the work required is minor. This example, illustrates again how the amount requested can be an unreliable guide. Full details of the work required allow a sound judgment to be reached.

Example 3

Mr E applies for £400 to re-felt a roof. His home has a small extension with a flat roof, which is about 5 square metres in size. The felt is in disrepair. A quotation has been included from a long-established roofing firm, with the application form. This recommends that the following work should be completed:

- Strip off existing roof felt and clear away rubbish.
- Re-felt using one layer of fibre-based 1B 36kg sanded felt bedded in hot bitumen.
- Followed by one layer of HT 150 40kg polyester based elastomeric underlay felt.
- Followed by one layer of HT 250 40kg polyester based elastomeric cap sheet felt.
- Both layers also bedded in hot bitumen.
- One layer of fibre based 1E 38kg green mineral felt to all edges and jointed into brickwork where applicable.
- Finished off with solar reflective paint.

The total price including materials, labour, and VAT is £400. The roofer has advised the applicant that the job will take him and his mate about half a day.

The roof area requiring re-felting is small. The labour time is about one man-day. The total cost is modest, even though the work is being carried out by long-established, professional roofers, who are charging VAT. It is suggested that on the particular facts of this case the work requested is minor.

3. Treating items individually or together

The principles outlined in the Advice are illustrated in the following examples:

Example 1

Mr Y applies for the following expenses: the installation of two cupboards, the plumbing in of a sink, the laying of kitchen tiles, the installation of an extractor fan and a new lock for the front door.

The Inspector considers that, with the exception of the door lock, all the expenses requested are part of the same underlying need (the fitting of a new kitchen). Collectively these costs are not minor and are therefore excluded. The new door lock, on the other hand, is part of a different need and is considered separately. It is a minor improvement and is therefore not excluded.

Example 2

Miss W applies for double-glazing for her bedroom, her son's bedroom and her living room. On her application form she quotes separate prices for each room. She also asks for the cost of having the leaking ceiling in her living room repaired.

The Inspector treats the leaking ceiling separately from the other needs. In itself, it is a minor repair, so it is not excluded. The rest of the needs he treats together. Although the costs have been detailed separately and relate to different rooms, they are all part of the same underlying need (to reduce noise and heat loss). Taken together, these improvements are not minor. They are excluded.