

REVIEW OF DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT PROCESS

Housing & Health Advisory Committee – 22 September 2015

Report of Chief Housing Officer

Status: For Information

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary

This report sets out the findings of the evaluation of a pilot project undertaken by the Housing Advice and Standards Team to deliver all aspects of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) in house. These findings support a Portfolio Holders decision which has been taken where it has been agreed that the pilot project was successful and the Council should continue to provide all aspects of works connected with DFGs in house.

Benefits of the in house service have been identified as:

- Improved ability to effectively manage DFG budget spend;
 - A more responsive service for residents is provided with a high level of customer satisfaction;
 - The generation of income for the Council;
 - Positive benefits for the Council's reputation as the Council is identified by residents and their extended families as providing a valuable and much needed service.
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This report supports the Key Aim of

Community Plan: Caring Communities – Action 1 - Adapting properties to enable older and vulnerable people to live as independently as possible.

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Lowe

Contact Officer(s) Jane Ellis Ext. 7296

Recommendation to Housing & Health Advisory Committee:

(a) To note the contents of the report.

Reason for recommendation:

This report has been created to share with members the findings of the DFG pilot project evaluation and to highlight the benefits to the residents of the Sevenoaks District of continuing to deliver DFGs in house.

Introduction

Review of the Pilot

The following aspects were considered in the evaluation of the pilot project:

- How well the resources meet the needs of residents now and would continue to do so the future;
- Comparing Sevenoaks District Council's (SDC's) performance with that of other Councils;
- Establishing that there are clear procedures in place for the processing of DFGs;
- To carry out a value for money assessment of the Council's processes for the allocation of grants;
- To make recommendations for improvements as appropriate.

Review Process

- 1 A review group was created comprising of officers who are responsible for delivering the DFG service: the Disabled Facility Grant Support Officer, a Housing Standards Officer, the Housing Standards Team Leader and the Housing Advice and Standards Manager. Other parties contributed to the work of the review group as follows:
 - Kent County Council (KCC) Occupational Therapy;
 - Customers who have accessed the service;
 - Officers from West Kent Housing Association (WKHA);
 - Service Accountant – Finance;
 - Legal;
 - Audit.
- 2 To evaluate performance and service delivery, the review group held a series of meetings, involved partner agencies and undertook a desk top review.

Background

- 3 For a number of years the Council's DFG service was delivered by the Home Improvement Agency (HIA). Initially, there were many benefits of this method of delivery but over time the HIA had difficulties spending the budget allocated for DFG's. There were also issues identified with the level of technical staff at the HIA, with surveyors being stretched across several areas. This meant that surveyors struggled to meet the requirements of all partner Council's effectively.
- 4 In 2013 it was agreed by SDC members that a pilot project could commence to bring the DFG service back in house in order to determine whether staff at the Council could improve service delivery to residents.

- 5 The Council also provides a ring-fenced budget of £250K to West Kent Housing Association (WKHA) who undertakes the installation of DFGs in their own stock but this element of DFG works did not form part of the pilot.

The Aims, Objectives or Purpose of the DFG Service

- 6 A DFG is a grant available to owner occupiers, private sector tenants and housing association tenants to enable adaptations to be carried out in their homes to meet disability needs. The grant aims to make the home environment more suitable for a disabled person to live in by providing access to essential facilities for daily living. The adaptations funded by a DFG also help carers and families manage more easily.
- 7 The aim is to deliver effective and timely adaptations to disabled people. Having consulted with KCC Occupational Therapists, the Council determines whether the scheme of works that has been proposed are 'necessary and appropriate' and 'reasonable and practicable' within the meaning of the grant legislation and that the works also meet the identified needs of the disabled person. The disabled person (or person applying for the grant on their behalf) can choose who completes the works. They may elect to engage the Council to arrange the estimates, draw up plans and supervise the works; they may arrange the works themselves or commission the HIA to do so.

Statutory Framework

- 8 Under the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, the Council has a statutory duty to provide financial assistance to disabled people for a range of essential adaptations to their homes through the provision of a DFG. The DFG is a mandatory grant and to comply with legislation, the Council must either approve the grant application as soon as reasonably practicable but in any event, not later than 6 months.
- 9 Where grants are given to owner occupiers and the property is sold, the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996: Disabled Facilities Grant (Conditions relating to approval or payment of Grant) General Consent 2008 enables the Council to recover a portion of any grant funding awarded.

Current Resources

- 10 The Council is allocated around £477K annually by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to fund DFGs. Until 2008 it was a requirement for local authorities to match fund an additional 40% of the DCLG allocation. However, local authorities were given greater flexibility in the way they designed and administered the DFG funding to better fit with local delivery arrangements and individual needs. Authorities were however expected to continue to invest in the DFG service in order to meet demand. The Council has continued to invest but has reduced its contribution since 2008 to £57K in the financial year 15/16.

- 11 The team processing DFG applications consists of:
- 2 FTE Housing Standards Officers (1 post is vacant has been temporarily filled with agency staff)
 - 1FTE DFG Support Officer
 - 1 FTE Housing Standards Team Leader

Conclusions

Staffing

- 12 Technically qualified staff employed by the Council began to use their technical expertise in a practical way again as a result of bringing the DFG service in house. Staff advise that this has enabled them to feel improved job satisfaction and job enrichment as they find the work more varied and challenging than previously. Staff have also reported that they feel a sense of purpose from the value their work brings to residents lives.
- 13 At present there is only one qualified Housing Standards Officer able to undertake the technical work relating to DFGs and having all this expertise held by only one officer, leaves the team vulnerable going forward should that officer become sick over a longer term, or resign. A trainee post is to be advertised in October 2015 to assist the very busy team and sustain the in-house service. This cost of this post will be met from existing budgets.

Budget

- 14 The table at Appendix A sets out benchmarking figures obtained at the end of the financial year 2014/2015 and contrasts spend across West and North Kent Authorities in relation to DFGs. As each Authority's grant spend and structure is different, in order to make a comparison, expenditure needs to be considered as a percentage of the annual budget. The HIA deliver the DFG service for all other Authorities in the table and therefore, it is clear that in the last financial year SDC has outperformed all of West and North Kent as a result of offering the DFG service in house. This is the highest level of performance achieved for several years by the Council.
- 15 Delivering the service in house has enabled the Council to better control spend, whereas before, this control was led by the HIA and it was more difficult for the Council to exercise control. The process to agree to fund a DFG is complex with many stages as follows:
- Resident needs to be referred for an OT assessment and is placed on the waiting list;
 - OT carries out an assessment;
 - OT provides the Council with recommendations for works;
 - The Council agrees the works;
 - The Council tenders for the works to ensure value for money;

- The resident makes their formal DFG application and is processed;
- Once the grant has been approved, the work is booked in with the contractor (subject to their availability);
- Work starts on site.

By delivering the service in house, a good workflow has been established to enable fluidity in the system. Referrals are now made from Occupational Therapists (OTs) continuously, meaning that contractors are constantly busy, with a good flow of fresh work. When workflow is consistent, without gaps, it enables a good level of grant approvals to be made, which in turn enables spend to be better managed going forward.

- 16 The Council is legally entitled to charge a fee (which is eligible to be included in the grant award) to cover the costs of processing a DFG. It is anticipated that this will recover for the Council in the region of £20K - £25K each year and this will contribute towards the salary of the Support Officer role as well as to wider corporate savings. The Housing Team has spent the period of the pilot working with the Council's legal team to develop contracts to cover the charging of fees.

Customer Satisfaction

- 17 Customer satisfaction for the in house delivery of DFGs is high with no customers reporting that they were dissatisfied. 60% of customers very satisfied – the highest rating.
- 18 Details of customer feedback during the pilot period are set out in appendix 1. Please note, not all fields in the questionnaire are mandatory which means that some customers did not provide a response to all questions.
- 19 All customers were really pleased when the works were complete. An example of the positive impact this service has on the lives of residents is further illustrated in the case study in appendix 2 of this report.
- 20 There have been no formal complaints regarding the in house DFG service during the period of the Pilot.

Some customers found the paperwork confusing

- 21 Some customer feedback advised that the paper work was confusing. The Council originally used paperwork used by the HIA and having acted on this customer feedback, documents have been streamlined. More support is also now given to customers to complete paperwork. We will monitor this going forward to ensure this issue has been fully resolved.

Some customers thought that the process took too long.

- 22 Processing times for DFGs have improved since service delivery was brought in house from the HIA but the customer feedback clearly demonstrates that customers do not understand that the process of assessment, applying for funding and installing works is lengthy and takes several months. All applications for

adaptions are urgent to the resident but having to wait while agencies and contractors are coordinated, tenders obtained and drawings undertaken is frustrating when you are not well and struggling to cope at home, perhaps with carers visiting several times a day. Since bringing the service in house a layer of bureaucracy has been removed and decision making has been streamlined and made faster.

- 23 The DFG process is still multi agency and residents are confused as to who is responsible for what part of the process. For example, there can be a 12 month wait for a social services assessment which residents sometimes misunderstand as being the responsibility of the District Council. Residents also don't understand the lead in time needed by each agency to complete their part of the process, for example, it can take up to 8 weeks to manufacture a stair lift and 10 weeks to build a through floor lift. Although this is not a long time in reality to construct equipment, it seems a long time for the person who is relying on a commode and can't get upstairs. Other factors that can contribute towards delays are the poor health of the customer and the availability of contractors.
- 24 This feedback has enabled us to develop appropriate literature to explain clearly the average length of time for different types of installation so that the customer has a realistic understanding of what will happen and how quickly. A flowchart is also being developed to set out the process with estimated timescales for each element, along with who is responsible for each part to help customers understand better.

Some customers told us there were too many surveys

- 25 This feedback from customers highlighted that they were being asked a number of times whether they were satisfied with the service. This was a particular issue for West Kent tenants who are surveyed by both West Kent and the Council.
- 26 Steps are being taken to implement a "Tell Us Once" approach by combining all satisfaction questionnaires and the Council taking the lead on undertaking the survey as we are ultimately responsible for paying contractors.

Working in Partnership

- 27 Managing the service in house has enabled the Council to work much more closely with contractors and develop a high level of trust with them; this was something that was not possible when the service was delivered with the HIA, as the HIA was an intermediary who liaised with contractors. The benefits of the in house service is that the Council is able to vet contractors more effectively and identify issues more quickly. As there is a closer working relationship with contractors the Council is able to negotiate effectively in the interests of residents and resolve any issues that arise direct. Under the previous system, the Council tended to hear of problems rather than be notified of them and was not always involved in finding a solution which added to delays and complaints.
- 28 Delivering the Service in house has also enabled improvements in the working relationships with KCC Occupational Therapy Case Managers. Constructive dialogue regularly takes place to resolve issues with demand for the service through regular meetings. These meetings enabled the Council to establish that

due to restructuring within KCC, referrals for adaptations were not always being passed through to OT's. This has now been resolved. In addition to restructuring, KCC has experienced difficulties retaining experienced, skilled OT's and staff at KCC change frequently, which has made consistency in approach regarding assessments difficult to achieve. SDC organises a district wide meeting on a quarterly basis with all OT's where individual cases are discussed. Where there are difficulties, solutions are identified with input from everyone present. The regular liaison with KCC OT's also helps to resolve conflict between what is requested and what is reasonable to fund from the public purse.

- 29 KCC OT's provided some comments for this report which confirmed that professional relationships are good, there is mutual respect on all sides and problems are always resolved. However, their feedback also highlighted that they did not completely understand the Council's role and responsibilities relating to DFG funding and there is a need for more joint training in this area. This will be achieved by introducing into the quarterly meetings with OT's case study examples to discuss as a group, explaining why and how certain decisions were made by the Council and how issues were resolved. This was not possible to achieve when the process was managed by the HIA.
- 30 KCC staff also confirmed that when the Housing Standards Team are fully staffed, the service provided is fast and streamlined, highlighting the importance of recruiting to the vacant trainee Housing Standards Officer post.
- 31 Other aspects they considered to be good practice are the dedicated Housing Standards Support Officer role which provides a point of contact for customers to respond to their queries. People find this very helpful and reassuring. The Housing Standards Support Officer role is a cross cutting role and pulls together initiatives from the Council's Housing Policy Team, such as providing energy efficiency advice and promoting Switch and Save, Health initiatives such as Winter Warmth. HERO Project and housing options, as well as identifying top up charitable funding. This provides an enhanced service to residents which has a wider scope than just DFGs and is excellent value for money.
- 32 KCC strongly felt that now the service is in house, there are less links in the chain of communication and information is passed on fewer times giving less scope for confusion or mistakes.

Customer Choice

- 33 Customers are able to select an agent or contractor of their choice to do the work and the Council supports them in selecting the right contractor for them. Another benefit is that the customer is also able to commission the contractor do private work for them whilst the contractor is carrying out DFG work. This is at the customers own cost and is usually at preferential rates. Customers can select the contractor of their choice from the three that tender for the works, even if this is not the lowest quote, on the basis that the customer will pay the difference.
- 34 There is also the option for the customer to do the works themselves but in these circumstances, the grant funding just covers materials only.

- 35 The customer has control over whether to proceed with the grant or not and on bigger grants, we try to accommodate customer's requirements and wishes as much as possible by providing offset grants. This enables customers to control how their needs are met and what the DFG contributes towards. Usually when an offset grant is provided, this is to deliver a solution which is usually a more extensive than the state alone can provide.
- 36 The customer can also choose when, within the 12 months from approval of the grant, when the works are undertaken.

Audit

- 37 Mid point through the Pilot programme, the Council's Audit Team reviewed the working arrangements for this service and gave feedback. The report from internal audit recognised that the service was in development and rated the service "satisfactory". Audit confirmed the areas that had already been identified by the Housing Team as needing development during the pilot and made recommendations to support these, all of which have been implemented and used to design the way the service is developed.
- 38 One of the main areas of progress is obtaining further support from the Council's IT team. There was limited knowledge in house of how to manage the Uniform software used to administer grants and in order to improve this, IT have agreed to joint fund with Housing the engagement of a specialist Uniform consultant to meet with both IT and Housing to establish exactly what is needed from the software and then go on and develop a bespoke training course so that the software is effectively utilised going forward.

Future Opportunities

- 39 As the contracts are not yet in place to cover the charging of fees, the Council is unable to take on private work for people who are not eligible for grant funding but who can fund their own works. Once the contracts are in place, the Council will be able to charge a fee for these works and generate additional income. This work is currently being undertaken by the HIA. The HIA often is not the resident's first choice of agent as, in order to establish that the resident is not entitled to a DFG; the Council has visited them at home, usually with the OT and completed paperwork. The resident feels that they trust the Council and do not want new people introduced to the situation but they are unable to engage us without the appropriate contract. The Council's legal team have helped to develop the appropriate contract and enquiries are being made with our insurance company to indemnify the Council. Once these aspects are in place, the team can consider private work.
- 40 There is a need to develop SDC staff to increase their experience and expertise so that the Council can process larger and more complex work. At present, complex jobs are undertaken by the HIA and they claim a fee for this work. If the Council developed in house skills, there would be the opportunity to charge more fees and increase income going forward.

- 41 The Team would like to explore whether there is also scope to deliver DFG works for others Authorities where they do not have the technical skills in house to do this work themselves. This would generate more income for the Council.
- 42 Consideration also needs to be given to future demand for DFG's in future. Should the Council find continuing to provide additional capital investment at the same level as at present challenging, a further risk assessment and options appraisal would be needed to evaluate the impact of this at that time.
- 43 Demand is likely to increase going forward and KCC OT's have identified drivers for demand for DFGs as:
- People are increasingly keen to remain in their own homes;
 - More community services such as Telecare and Telehealth technology and Community Rehabilitation teams prevent/reduce admissions and drive towards keeping people at home rather than in institutions;
 - The District has an ageing population;
 - Medical treatments have advanced meaning people live longer, or are able to live fuller lives within the community rather than in an inpatient/residential setting.
- 44 There is also an element of hidden demand in the system as delays in obtaining an OT assessment can mean that it can take up to 12 months to obtain an assessment in some cases.
- 45 Should grant funding reduce, or SDC be unable to contribute capital funding, it is likely that policies would need to be changed to target available resources by introducing a system which directs grant aid to those most in need. Such action would put the Council at greater risk of legal challenge and the implications of this need to be properly considered at that time. Deferred payments could be considered to contractors which could result in contractors refusing to undertake DFG works. The possible affect of these factors is noted but is considered to be outside the scope of this report on the performance of the in house pilot.
- 46 The Better Care Fund was introduced in June 2013 to support the transformation and integration of health and social care services to ensure local people receive better care. The Better Care Fund is a pooled budget that moves resources into social care and community services in order to better meet the increasingly complex needs of an aging population. Grant funding for DFGs has been included in the Fund so that the provision of adaptations can be incorporated into the strategic consideration and planning of investment. It is paid to KCC and passed on to District Councils, who have a statutory duty to provide DFGs. While our DFG funding is currently ring-fenced and KCC must pass it to Districts, it is a risk that this may not always be the case. This situation will continue to be closely monitored as the Better Care plans become more established.

Key Implications

Financial

Some potential financial implications have been set out in the body of this report at paragraphs 43 – 46.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

The Council has a statutory duty to deliver DFGs, There are no other legal implications arising from this report.

Equality Assessment

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups, and (iii) foster good relations between people from different groups. The decisions recommended through this paper directly impact on end users. The impact has been analysed and varies between groups of people. The results of this analysis are set out immediately below.

When awarding DFG funding there is an impact on individuals who have a protected characteristic as awarding funding will mean treating some individuals more favourably than others. This is justified however; as this funding will advance the disabled individuals circumstances so that they can have a good quality of life, live at home and receive safe care, the same as any other person would who does not have a disability.

Conclusions

Please see the Executive Summary at the beginning of this document. A Portfolio Holders decision has been taken to support the continuation of the delivery of DFG's in house.

Appendices

Appendix A – Monitoring report data

Background Papers:

Appendix 1: Customer Satisfaction Survey results.

Appendix 2: Case Study

Appendix 3: Current Policy

Pat Smith
Chief Housing Officer

Appendix A

Monitoring Report - Jan to March 2015

	Dartford	Gravesham	Maidstone	Sevenoaks & West Kent HA	T & M	Tunbridge Wells
Total Budget	£400,000.00	£590,000.00	£780,000.00	£566,000.00	£652,000.00	£600,000.00
		+540,000 last year				
Total Expenditure in Quarter	£112,999.00	£354,203.35	£199,146.00	£311,096.00	£145,652.00	£201,911.26
Total Spend to date for year	£338,007.00	£763,468.04	£555,453.00	£548,255.00	£559,000.00	£504,099.10
Percentage Spend	84%	67%	71%	97%	85%	84%
No.of applications approved in quarter	8	13	26	16	18	20
No of applications in quarter	7	7	20	21	17	20
Total amount of grant approved in quarter	£87,147.00	£122,208.30	£173,752.00	£145,255.00	£74,457.00	£132,438.60
Total eligible costs of work approved in quarter	£88,031.00	£124,353.76	£173,752.00	£146,629.00	£78,252.00	£135,202.82
Total No of applications approved to date	33	61	132	89	77	77
Total amount of grant approved to date	£280,296.00	£742,934.17	£875,859.00	£565,732.00	£494,720.00	£521,834.31
Average value of grants approved in financial year	£8,494.00	£12,179.25	£6,901.00	£6,356.55	£6,425.00	£6,777.00
No of applications outstanding	1	0	5	5	0	1
No of enquiries outstanding	44	89	37	29	161	37
Av time for approval year to date (wks/dys)	13 days	13.25 Days	103 days	14	8	7 days