

People Select Committee
Scrutiny Review of Disabled Facilities Grants

PEOPLE SELECT COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1. This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the People Select Committee's scrutiny review of Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG).
- 1.2. DFG's are means tested grants of a maximum £30,000 provided by the Council via the Improved Better Care Fund (IBCF) programme to make an individual's home suitable to their needs, and may include widening doors, installing ramps, improving access to facilities via stair lifts or level access showers, or building extensions to accommodate downstairs bedroom/bathing facilities. DFG's are means tested for applicants over 18 and based on the income and savings of both applicant and any partners, although the first £6,000 household savings is exempt from the means test. There are passported benefits where the means test does not apply, such as Universal Credit, Income Support, Income-based Employment and Support Allowance, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Guarantee Pension Credit, Working Tax Credit and/or Child Tax Credit, and Housing Benefit. In January 2025 members were made aware of a request made to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) from the Royal British Legion, as part of their Credit their Service campaign, to use existing discretionary powers to ensure that military compensation is never treated as income in means tests for locally administered benefits, which includes DFG.
- 1.3. Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide the grant to eligible residents and legislation governing DFG's sets out the following duties:
 - make residents aware of options available to meet their needs
 - give reasons if DFG is not granted
 - make residents aware of how to complain or appeal
- 1.4. Legislation contained within the Housing Grants Construction & Regeneration Act 1996 (HGRA) states that an application must contain a detailed schedule of works and 2 estimates from different contractors (unless the case is fast-tracked or where the works are part of an approved single contractor scheme). In addition, adaptations must be necessary and appropriate.
- 1.5. The Care Act 2014 states that LA's have a legal duty to carry out assessment of need to anyone who "appears to have a care and support need" and a general duty to arrange provision of preventative services
- 1.6. There are also statutory timescales for the time it takes from DFG application to approved (6 months) and certification of works (12 months)
- 1.7. DFG's helps some of the most vulnerable residents with disabilities in the Borough live independently in their own homes for longer, preventing pressure on other council and health services and supporting hospital discharge. The review has therefore focused

on how Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council (SBC) delivers this crucial service, to ensure it is done so in the most effective and efficient way whilst still meeting vulnerable resident's needs.

- 1.8. While SBC will only fund the minimum specification required to meet the applicants need, the Committee was assured that the applicant can fund adaptations above the basic offer themselves. The Committee also noted the conditions contained within SBC's DFG policy are fully explained when the applicant is notified that their DFG application has been successful. These include eligible works only being carried out by the contractors whose estimates accompany the formal application and in accordance with the specification in the grant approval document, works must be carried out within 12 months of date of approval, payment/part payment of the grant is conditional upon works being completed to the satisfaction of SBC, the applicant must intend to live in the property as their only or main residence for 5 years, and SBC may require any specialist or portable equipment to be returned when no longer needed

- 1.9. There are five stages of a DFG as outlined below:

Stage 0	First Contact	Public information and advice Contact Centre
Stage 1	Assessment	Triage to identify appropriate response Assessment of needs
Stage 2	Compile the Application	Application form and eligibility information Design and costing of adaptations
Stage 3	Approval	Check application is correct Issue approval letter
Stage 4	Carry out the works	Arrange and carry out the works Ensure all is satisfactory and make payment

- 1.10. Assessments are carried out by the Occupational Therapy (OT) service who receive referrals for assessments via First Contact or SBC internal Social Care Team. Referrals can also come from the Nomination and Letting Team and Registered Providers (RP's) such as Thirteen. Once the assessment has taken place and a referral for a DFG is made to the Housing Investment & Migration Support Team (HI&MS), the person joins the waiting list to apply for a DFG, and this ensures a fair and transparent process is adhered to. They will receive written confirmation of the referral. SBC's in-house Home Improvement Agency (HIA) provides lower-level adaptations and support (under £1,000), and any immediate measures that can be put in place. The OT can decide if the application should be "fast tracked" to the top of the list due to their need.
- 1.11. When the person reaches the top of the waiting list an appointment is made to commence the formal grant process. The HI&MS Team offers an Agency Service to all applicants to help them in compiling their application and provide help, advice and support through the whole of the DFG process. As stated above the application must contain a detailed schedule of works and two estimates from different contractors, along with proof of future occupation. Application forms are completed by the technical officer (TO) at the initial visit. Draft plans are drawn up by a TO during a home visit, on return to the office the TO produces a CAD drawing and provides a schedule of works to accompany the drawing. These are sent to the referring OT for review, with a two

week deadline for approval. Very few schedules of works are amended, and this may be causing unnecessary delays for straightforward cases. The application is approved or refused within 6 months of applying. If it is refused then reasons for this will be provided.

- 1.12. The TO provides initial design and schedule of works to the relevant building contractor. Building Services (the Councils internal building team) carry out Level Entry Showers which make up the majority of the DFG adaptations works, as well as door widening if capacity allows. Other adaptations are carried out via one of four builders that have a Minor Works Contract with SBC. Applicants can organise for their own contractor to carry out the work, but work can not start until the DFG has been approved. All work carried out for DFG is inspected by the TO whether this is carried out by Building Services, one of the four SBC contractors, or the applicants own contractor. Applicants are asked to sign a letter to confirm their satisfaction with the work. If the applicant has any issues with the works within the first 12 months, they can contact the team to rectify the issue. After 12 months it is the responsibility of the applicant to maintain their adaptations.
- 1.13. When comparing SBC's performance in delivering DFG's with the regional and national data, SBC delivered significantly more DFG's for 0-17 year old age group and fewer DFG's to the 66+ age group. The data also shows that SBC's delivery times for the overall process are average nationally, and faster than most Local Authorities at approval stage, Stage 3. However, SBC took longer to compile the application (stage 2, which has no statutory time limit) when compared both regionally and nationally. Members were informed that this has been affected by both reduced staff levels, which were being addressed, and discussions with clients to manage expectations. SBC also took longer at stage 4 – carrying out the works, which has a statutory timeframe of being completed within 12 months of approval. This had been affected by the number of extensions that had been carried out in the year data was reported, which take longer to complete.
- 1.14. The Committee notes that the waiting list for those wishing to apply for a DFG is growing, standing at 322 in December 2024 with a two-year timeframe from referral to installation of the adaptation. This has been attributed to several factors including a greater awareness of the OT service and lockdowns/COVID's impact on older residents remaining active. It is further noted that although fast track applications ensures that those who have critical or time-sensitive needs receive timely adaptations, it has an impact on the remaining people on the waiting list. In addition to the growing waiting lists, the average amount of grant approved is also rising, due to inflation and rising building costs, creating budget pressures.
- 1.15. The Committee were particularly concerned that the waiting lists includes a rising number of people who live in RP rented properties While there is no legal obligation for RP's to fund all adaptations to their properties for their tenants, there is an expectation that they will do so within their own resources. Thirteen are the exception to this as they have a commitment within the Stock Transfer Agreement to spend £1m per year for 30 years on adaptations to properties within the Borough. Details confirming the properties Thirteen have adapted to meet their commitment and type of

adaptations carried out have been requested but still outstanding in December 2024. In addition, the Committee found that not only are applications for a DFG from RP tenants increasing but there is an absence of information on all RP properties i.e., a register of adapted properties which details the number of properties and type of adaptations completed.

- 1.16. The Committee found that communication with DFG applicants is an area that needs to be addressed. This includes the information available on SBC website, communication with applicants during the waiting periods to ensure the processes are fully understood and manage expectations, and information for those who do not qualify for a DFG such as next steps and advice on where to go for further assistance which appeared to be missing. In addition, customer feedback is important, and this has historically been collected via different services involved: OT's, Building and Housing Services. Members heard how this is now being streamlined into one survey and are keen that it captures feedback on all stages of the process.
- 1.17. Members believe that further exploration is required of the streamlining of processes to fully understand the impact and whether they would reduce delays and allow for quicker processing. These include reviewing referral forms used by OT to ensure it captures all relevant information, removing the requirement for OT to approve the scheme of works for straight forward cases, allowing electronic forms to be uploaded, and attaching only two quotes for the works to the application as per the statutory requirement.
- 1.18. Improvement to processes and communication will not, however, address the growing pressure as demand continues to outstrip funding. Previously this shortfall in funding has been met from other budgets. While bespoke meetings have been put in place to monitor the DFG budget and ensure there is no further overspend, the implications of this will be that the waiting list will continue to grow. In January 2025 the MHCLG announced a further £86m additional funding for 2024/25, and SBC's share of this will be £270,856, taking the total government funding for 2024/25 to £2,239,284. Confirmation on 2025/26 allocation for DFG was also received in January 2025, and this was also £2,239,284. This would allow 49 extra Level Entry Showers, Ramps or Stairlifts, the most required adaptations, to take place and reduce the waiting list by approximately 100. However, Members noted that it is not possible to predict how many new referrals will be received.
- 1.19. SBC's in-house HIA provides lower-level adaptations and support, and the Committee believes this could potentially be utilized to further provide early help and prevention to ease budgetary pressures for DFG. Further consideration and investigation of this should be taken.
- 1.20. The Committee acknowledges that the long-term implications of delays in provision of a DFG adaptations could have a negative impact on an individual's quality of life and health outcomes, along with a need for re-housing or admission to long term residential care. The recommendations include exploring ways to manage expectations and improve processes, however without finding alternative means to provide adaptations or further funding there will be a limit on the number of DFG's that SBC is able to approve each year. Therefore, closer working with RP's and reviewing the impact of the recent announcement of extra funding for DFG's on our Borough is also being suggested within the recommendations.

Recommendations

The Committee recommends that:

1. In relation to the recent announcement from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government regarding extra funding for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG), officers be requested to monitor the impact of this extra funding on the Council's waiting list; updates to be provided to the Select Committee as part of the monitoring of the review recommendation.
2. Officers explore the potential to engage with Teesside University to produce a study on the impact of DFG's on people lives in the Borough and how long this potentially allows them to remain living in their own home.
3. Housing Investment & Migration Support team work with Planning to explore building upon the requirements for accessibility/adaptability in new build properties when the Local Plan is next updated and, prior to this, lobby government to make the relevant Building Regulations mandatory.
4. The Leader and Chief Executive support officers in their ongoing discussions with Registered Provider's to explore their current and future plans for adaptations and also explore joint working to support Registered Providers to take up their responsibility, to ease pressure on the waiting list.
5. Officers explore with Registered Providers a register of adapted properties within the Borough which details the type of adaptations, to assist the Nomination and Lettings Team in advertising and matching individuals with appropriate properties.
6. Communication to residents and applicants be improved by:
 - reviewing and updating information on SBC website and explore whether the Foundations template and link to adaptmyhome.com will give residents sufficient information to decide whether to apply for an assessment/DFG.
 - exploring introducing a system to ensure clear and consistent communications to keep applicants informed of their position in the process at regular intervals to reduce misunderstandings and manage expectations.
 - Sharing key information of DFG scheme available with external stakeholders to ensure potential applicants are aware of support available.
 - ensuring an appropriate route for residents to communicate with the Housing Investment & Migration Support team is in place.
 - a singular customer feedback survey covering all processes and services involved in a DFG is developed, to ensure this is only collected once.
7. Officers explore streamlining processes to understand their impact and benefit of implementing:
 - referral form used by the Occupational Therapy Team be reviewed to ensure it captures all relevant information to enabled to make a decision on eligible works.

- removing the requirement for Occupational Therapist to approve the scheme of works for straightforward cases.
 - allowing electronic forms to be uploaded.
 - requiring only two quotes rather than three for the application.
8. Further examination of if/how the Home Improvement Agency can be utilised to provide early help and prevention, to ease budgetary pressure for DFG
 9. Use of flat pack extensions is explored in more detail to see if they would provide a viable and cost-effective option.
 10. Following correspondence from the Royal British Legion to the Council, officers review whether it is possible for military compensation to be exempt from the means test for DFG's and report back to the Committee.