



Draft Report
Scrutiny Review of Disabled Facilities Grants
By Scrutiny (Audit and Value for Money Council Services) Committee

Background

The committee wanted to consider the length of time the DFG process takes from enquiry to completion concentrating on how this can be improved for the client efficiently and effectively. This means assessing each step, looking at how the time can be reduced and if a supplier has impacted on the delivery of DFG's.

The following Members were assigned to the sub group:

- Councillor Andjelkovic
- Councillor Chaudhry
- Councillor Sankey

The sub group met on three occasions between September 2019 and December 2019:

Date	Attendance (Cllrs)
Tues 01/10/2019	Sankey
Tues 06/11/2019	Andjelkovic / Chaudhry / Sankey
Tues 04/12/2019	Andjelkovic / Chaudhry / Sankey

Scrutiny approach

The purpose of the review is to identify the issues in the process and look at how to improve the process cycle from enquiry to completion. Also ensuring the DFG budget per annum is being spent.

The sub-group met on three occasions between September and December 2019. Several written questions were submitted by the sub-group and written responses received from the Environmental Health Manager.

An interview was held with the Environmental Health Manager and the sub-group to understand the Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG's) process and how the budget is being utilised against the demand.

The process for DFG's was provided and circulated to the group.

There is a Corporate Plan Target VFM54 to 'Complete a Review of the Disabled Facilities Grant Service'. The sub-group have seen this report which was presented to Cabinet in December 2019.

Scrutiny Review Scope

The following questions were suggested and agreed by the sub-group in order to provide focus including some additional questions raised during the review.

- 1. What the Council is accountable for under DFG's?**
- 2. Types / categories of DFG's being approved categories of DFG applications.**
- 3. What is the average time each step in the DFG process takes from enquiry to completion?**
- 4. How can the time be reduced between each step of the DFG process?**
- 5. How can you ensure the money is being spent efficiently and effectively on DFG's?**

Scrutiny Review Findings

- 1. What the Council is accountable for under DFG's?**
 - 1.1 The Better Care Fund provides a mechanism for joint health and social care planning and commissioning, bringing together ring-fenced budgets from Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) allocations, the Disabled Facilities Grant and funding paid directly to local government for adult social care services – the Improved Better Care Fund (IBCF).
 - 1.2 The Council receives funding for Disabled Facilities Grants within the Borough from Staffordshire County Council, via funds pass ported from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). This agreement details the grant conditions in line with national Better Care Fund guidance that need to be complied with and certified to ensure that the monies have been spent in line with the guidance.
 - 1.3 East Staffordshire Borough Council has a statutory duty under the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 to provide financial assistance to disabled people for a range of essential adaptations to their home through a DFG.

- 1.4 A DFG is available to owner occupiers, private sector tenants and housing association tenants to enable adaptations to be carried out in their own home to meet disability needs.
- 1.5 The purposes for which mandatory disabled facilities grants may be given are set out in section 23(1) of the 1996 Act. The primary purpose is to facilitate access and provision, this includes work to remove or help overcome any obstacles which prevent the disabled person from moving freely into and around the dwelling and enjoying the use of the dwelling and the facilities or amenities within it.
- 1.6 The corporate Plan 2019/2020 states:
- “The Council adopted a new in-house Disabled Facilities Grant service from 1st April 2018, incorporating more efficient ways of working to secure faster and more cost efficient adaptations to enable residents to live independently in their own home. This is supported by a Disabled Facilities Grant Policy detailing a range of discretionary options alongside the mandatory grants process, encouraging clients to proactively manage their condition(s) via the uptake of support services provided by the Leisure and Cultural Services teams.”
- 1.7 Details of mandatory and discretionary threshold are contained in the [Disabled Facilities Grants Service Review](#) (including [Appendix 1](#) and [Appendix 2](#)) report to Cabinet dated 9 December 2019.

2. Types / categories of DFG’s being approved categories of DFG applications.

1 Care Need	ESBC OT service	Means Tested unless on benefits
2 Care Needs	SCC OT & ESBC OT Service	Means Tested unless on benefits
Children	SCC OT only	Not means tested
T&D Applicants*	T&D OT	Means tested unless on benefits

* Not agreeing to level showers on first floor.

3. What is the average time each step in the DFG process takes from enquiry to completion?

- 3.1 The Council adopted a new in-house Disabled Facilities Grant service from 1st April 2018, incorporating more efficient ways of working to secure faster and more cost efficient adaptations to enable residents to live independently in their own home.
- 3.2 This is supported by a Disabled Facilities Grant Policy detailing a range of discretionary options alongside the mandatory grants process, encouraging clients

to proactively manage their condition(s) via the uptake of support services provided by the Leisure and Cultural Services teams.

- 3.3 ESBC's DFG Policy stipulates key performance indicators for the approval of valid applications within 3 working days for urgent applications and 20 working days for all other cases to reduce the timescales associated with the delivery of a DFG. The current process aims to complete all urgent adaptations within 55 working days from the date of initial enquiry and 150 working days for non-urgent applications.
- 3.4 The Council changed the supplier in April 2018 and brought the service in-house. However there is backlog of legacy applications majority of which have been completed but still some outstanding.

The table below shows the average time for each stage.

Figure 1- Average Timescales Associated with DFG Stages

Table 1- DFG Stages (from the Cabinet report)

Stage	Description
Initial Enquiry	Depending on the needs of the client we receive notification of an initial enquiry from Staffordshire Cares if the client has 1 care need, Midlands Partnership Occupational Therapist team if the client has two or more care needs, Children's OT Team if the client is a child or Trent and Dove OT for some Trent and Dove tenants. The information provides a brief description of disability and what adaptation they feel they need.
Referral	The referral is provided by the Council's approved OT if the client is an adult (or Trent and Dove OT for some Trent and Dove tenants) or the Children's OT if the client is a child. This details the full adaptation that is required to meet the client's needs.
Application	Once a referral has been received the Adaptations Officers will process an application on behalf of the client. This involves obtaining ownership details of the property, tenant and/or owner permission certificates, financial checks or proof of benefits, drawing up plans and schedules of works, obtaining planning permission and/or building control approval if required, and contractor quotes.
Approval	Once a full and valid application has been submitted and approved by the Head of Service commencement dates will be identified between the client and contractor.

Completion

The adaptation has been completed and the works meet the requirements set by the OT. Certificates are obtained from the client, OT, building control (if required) along with any required certificates for electrical work etc and the contractor is paid.

3.5 The table above shows significant improvement in some stages. However it is noted that Referral to Application has increased in the current financial year and indeed at highest level in the last three years.

3.6 The cases worked on and passed over to ESBC by Revival (including timescales from referral to completion) are as follows: -

Average: 381 days
Maximum: 1091 days
Minimum: 149 days
Total Cases: 29

3.7 The cases worked on from the receipt of a referral by the ESBC DFG Team (including timescales from referral to completion) are as follows: -

Average: 218 days
Maximum: 349 days
Minimum: 75 days
Total Cases: 15

4. How can the time be reduced between each step of the DFG process?

4.1 The Environmental Health Manager stated that the Council's target of 50 days for urgent applications and 155 days for non-urgent applications is achievable.

4.2 The Council has sufficient internal resources which consist of 2 DFG administrators and 1 housing technical officer. In addition, the Occupational Therapists and contractors are in place.

4.3 Prima facie with the current resources and support there should be significant reduction in time between each step and this should be monitored closely with significant improvement by year end.

5. How can you ensure the money is being spent efficiently and effectively on DFG's?

5.1 Naturally as there is backlog of cases and the current performance remains below target, there is underspend of the budget. However it is noted that the money is rolled over into the next financial year.

- 5.2 The committee would like to see the time scales reduced and DFGs delivered efficiently. This should lead to more accurate forecast and actual spend achieved each financial year.
- 5.3 The Internal Audit report undertaken in October 2019 also stated “We noted that there had been a very significant underspend of the funds awarded for 2018/19 - the overall DFG Budget for 18/19 was £1,142k, with £889k unspent. Grant funding for the year was £947,755. This was reported to Cabinet and the unspent sum approved for carry forward. The Environmental Health Team Manager has advised that the unspent allocation was not due to lack of demand but mainly due to delays inherited from the Home Improvement Agency (previously used) and changes to the way in which the OT referral worked with the County Council. We do not consider this is a control weakness, rather a matter which requires ongoing operational management. We understand that the Council is working to ensure funds are suitably spent in 2019/20.”
- 5.4 In addition, the audit report awarded “moderate” level of assurance for “Up to date procedures for the receipt and assessment of grant applications and the authorisation and payment of grants are in place.”
- 5.5 The moderate level is defined as “The audit did not highlight any weaknesses that would in overall terms impact on the achievement of the system's key objectives. However, the audit did identify some control weaknesses that have impacted on the delivery of certain system objectives. As a result, only moderate assurance can be given on the design and operation of the system's internal controls to prevent risks from impacting on achievement of the system's objectives.”

6. Summary

- 6.1 The sub-group has carried out a review and have read the recent report on a review of the current Disabled Facilities Grant service. They have raised questions in specific areas, as detailed in this report.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward:

- 7.1 To set targets for each stage of the process;
- 7.2 To adopt the Audit recommendation to implement new procedures;
- 7.3 For the Corporate Plan Target to be reviewed 55 days for urgent & 150 days for non-urgent cases;
- 7.4 The Environmental Health Manager to provide quarterly performance updates for urgent and non urgent cases to the Audit (Value for Money) Scrutiny Committee;
- 7.5 To undertake a follow up of the DFG Scrutiny review within 12 months.