

CELG(4) HA 02
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Inquiry into Home Adaptations

Response from : Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council



Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council's Response in Respect of the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's 'Inquiry into Home Adaptations'.

Invitation to respond issued: 11th December 2012

20th December 2012

To Whom It May Concern:

Context

1. This response has been drafted by the Housing Renewal Manager of MTCBC who is responsible for administering the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) Programme within the County Borough of Merthyr Tydfil. Input has been sought and received from colleagues in Adult Services and Children Services within the Council.
2. In 2011/12 Merthyr Tydfil CBC was confirmed as the most efficient local authority in Wales, providing DFGs in an average delivery time of only 175 days (Performance Indicator – PSR 002). This delivery time has improved significantly since 2005/6 where DFGs took on average 598 days to deliver.
3. Since 2005/6 the Council has increased expenditure on DFGs by 350%. In 2005/6 the Council spent £285,000 on DFGs. In 2011/12 this figure had increased to £1,021,000.

Response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

Q1. Why there are still significant variations in the time it takes to deliver aids and adaptations funded by Disabled Facilities Grants across Wales;

4. As Chair of the South Wales Housing Renewal and Adaptations Group (SWHRAG) which represents 15 local authorities, I can confirm that the delivery of DFGs and minor adaptations is a high priority in all local authorities at this time
5. However from the meetings I attend and calls I have received from other local authorities since the publication of our 2011/12 performance figures, I can confirm that not all local authorities are using the correct 'start date' for the performance indicators (PSR 002, PSR 006 and PSR 009 (a) and (b)). This should not be the case as the Performance Indicator Guidance Document is very clear in

my opinion; however we have had in depth discussions within MTCBC around interpretation.

6. Resources across local authorities vary considerably, both capital and revenue. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is often disparity between the resources invested in Social Services (Community Occupational Therapists (COTS) and similar) and the Housing Grant function. This can result in delays and waiting lists. If the internal balance of revenue (staffing) resources are not correct then numerous referrals may be made from the COTS to the Grants Team, but the Grants Team have too few resources to action them immediately. The reverse is also true, where if COTs are under resourced – too few referrals can come through to the Grants Team, resulting in clients waiting for long periods for an initial COT assessment.
7. Many local authorities do not operate their own in-house home improvement Agency. This leaves the local authority in a difficult position as it is at the mercy of either the client or their appointed private Agent – to complete all the paperwork necessary for the DFG, compilation of tenders, technical drawings, building regulation and planning applications etc.... At MTCBC we run a very successful Agency called Grant Line. This is perhaps the single most important critical factor affecting service delivery times. If the local authority is not in control of the whole process – it follows that it cannot control the timescale to deliver the adaptation.
8. Operational procedures and structures vary considerably across local authorities. Many have fixed linear methods of working. However, MTCBC have found that a fluid and flexible approach to service delivery has reaped significant rewards. An example of this is the initial feasibility visit. This is undertaken prior to the COT referral for adaptation works. A joint visit will be made by a Grant Officer and the COT to devise the most suitable design from the outset. This saves significant time and money by eliminating the need for numerous revisions of plans at a later stage. The COTs are also more confident in making their referral as they know the works they are proposing are likely to be considered ‘reasonable and practicable’ by the Grants Team, and hence proceed.
9. The way local authorities (or their Agents) procure contractors can have a massive impact on service delivery times. Those local authorities who choose to tender each and every job will inevitably take much longer to deliver adaptation works and those which have a Framework arrangement or a pool of certified contractors from which to appoint a contractor.
10. The scope of works proposed by different local authorities will inevitably affect the time it takes to deliver such works. Some local authorities have prescriptive policies about what they will and will not provide during the course of a DFG. Others have a more flexible and liberal approach. Common sense dictates that large scale adaptations – costing £20,000 + will take longer to complete than routine internal alterations costing less than £10,000.
11. The effectiveness of the local authority’s promotion and marketing of available services will affect delivery times. Adaptations for children are normally of the

highest value and most extensive and therefore take longer to complete. Therefore local authorities who engage with disabled children, their parents or support groups are likely to undertake larger scale adaptations which will affect the performance indicator data.

12. MTCBC would warn against over reliance on performance indicators which solely focus on delivery times – as the panacea for quality service provision. Delivery times are just one factor which requires consideration. Only by delving into the detail of the adaptations provided can a true picture of performance be established.

Q2. Whether sufficient progress has been made on implementing recommendations from the Equality of Opportunity Committee's 2009 report on home adaptations;

13. As the recommendations made focussed primarily on Welsh Government – MTCBC cannot provide a comprehensive response as to actions taken since 2009. However, we do not agree with many of the recommendations in the first instance.

Q3. What impact reduced resources for housing are likely to have on the provision of home adaptations;

14. There is significant pressure on all local authority budgets at this time. At MTCBC we have had to reduce the Grants Team from 3 full time members of staff to 2 and ½ members of staff. This will be unsustainable should the increase in service requests continue at their present rate. Some revenue resources spent on our DFG service are subsidised by other funding sources. These are set to end in the next 18 months which will further compound matters.
15. Without significant investment in adaptation services (preferably ring fenced by WG) – adaptation services will struggle to make any considerable improvements, once the easy fixes are addressed.

Q4. Is the Welsh Government effectively monitoring the provision of adaptation services;

16. Welsh Government could request more in-depth information in relation to adaptation services; however this would provide an extra burden on service managers, who are already under pressure due to limited resources.
17. Very little monitoring appears to be done across tenure to make comparisons between PAGs, DFGs and other adaptation programmes.
18. MTCBC has advocated for a long time that PSR 002 and 009 should provide a breakdown of the stages involved in the DFG process. This would clearly show which local authorities have issues with certain aspects of the service. Example below:
 - 18.1. Average no of days from initial contact by client to COT assessment
 - 18.2. Average no of days from COT assessment to referral to Grants Team
 - 18.3. Average no of days to compile and process an application to approval s stage
 - 18.4. Average no of days for works on site

18.5. Average no of days for entire process

19. MTCBC already collects all of this information as part of its performance management system, the majority of the dates required to compile this information are readily available on existing computer systems (software such as MVM – Northgate).

Q5. What more needs to be done to improve home adaptation services in Wales.

20. Local authorities need to be more innovative in their approach to providing adaptations, which may include:
- (i) providing a fast track stair lift service
 - (ii) refining the application process
 - (iii) setting up of e-referrals from our Occupational Therapy colleagues
 - (iv) new literature advertising services
 - (v) joint feasibility visits with Occ Therapy and Grants Officers to assess client's needs at the outset of the majority of cases – identifying the most suitable solution from the outset
 - (vi) removal of Warranty Fees from our process (saving over £10,000 per annum); and replacing them instead with a deposit to a holding account in the case of equipment breakdown within 3 years of grant completion.
 - (vii) Refinement of select pool of expert local contractors
 - (viii) Use of a schedule of rates (reviewed annually) which removes the requirement for tendering
 - (ix) using contractor frameworks
 - (x) setting up in-house improvement agency
 - (xi) procure contractors and/or equipment - regionally

21. Welsh Government could:

- (i) hypothecate funding for DFGs and adaptations
- (ii) hold training and information days for operational staff and management within local authorities
- (iii) reduce its focus on delivery times and broaden its monitoring activities
- (iv) assist local authorities in overcoming some of the bureaucracy involved in changing local service provision – help remove internal barriers

Should you wish to discuss any of the information contained in this response, please contact:

Julian Pike
Housing Renewal Manager
01685 725373
07800 708729
julian.pike@merthyr.gov.uk