

**NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL**

**HOUSING AND STRATEGIC  
CABINET MEMBER**

**DISABLED FACILITIES GRANT PROCESS IMPROVEMENT**

**1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT**

- 1.1 To seek approval to change the arrangements for the assessment of people's needs as part of disabled facilities grant process.
- 1.2 The key points in this report are:
- Councils have a duty to provide adaptations to enable disabled people to live in their own homes.
  - The government prescribes the circumstances in which adaptations must be provided via Disabled Facilities Grant.
  - The council has reviewed its processes for providing Disabled Facilities Grants in order to try to reduce the length of time taken to approve or refuse applications.

**2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 2.1 The duty for councils to give grants to provide access to certain essential facilities is set out in the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. This legislation sets out the purpose and circumstances in which grants must be given. It also makes plain that it is the housing authority that awards grants and that there should be consultation with the social services authority. However, the responsibility for decision-making rests with the housing function.
- 2.2 For several years the initial point of contact for most disabled people has been the integrated occupational therapy service (O/T service). The O/T service have made referrals to multi-agency panels comprising adults and children's social services, North Lincolnshire Homes and the council's Home Improvement Team. These multi-agency panels have sought to determine whether major adaptations should be provided by disabled facilities grants (DFG's), how they were prioritised or whether other solutions were available.

2.3 Considerable effort has been invested in improving the approval and delivery of DFG's after the panel stage.

Some of the actions taken in recent months include: -

- An EU compliant procurement exercise to create a framework of contractors able to deliver the common types of adaptations.
- Agreement with North Lincolnshire Homes to use their procured partner to deliver common adaptations in their properties.
- Redesign of the application form (previously determined by government) and application process including means testing procedures.
- Involvement of the Local Link and call centre services in assisting applicants complete forms.
- Updating procedure manuals and data capture so that the software system provided more effective monitoring reports to enable better case and resource management.

2.4 These changes have seen a reduction since 2008/09 of 24% in the time taken from referral to the multi-agency panels to the formal approval of individual DFG's. Further significant reductions in the time taken to complete DFG works should take place as the framework arrangements become operational.

2.5 Whilst the multi agency approach remains key to meeting the needs of disabled children, young people and adults, the issue that has until now remained unresolved was the decision making process that had become entangled with the assessment of individual's disabilities.

### **3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

3.1 It is proposed to return the decision-making responsibility to the Housing Division.

3.2 The Home Improvement Team (the HIT) will take all initial enquiries about adaptations and will take sole responsibility for the administration of disabled facilities grants. The HIT will advise potential applicants of their likely eligibility, the options available to them and the likely timescales involved.

3.3 The HIT will consult with adults and children's services respectively but retain responsibility for determining the eligibility of individual applicants, the extent of work offered and the relative priority of individual applications. O/T assessments will be requested at the point that the HIT is in a position to proceed with each application.

3.4 This will reduce the number of assessments required as it will do away with the frequent need for re-assessments where referrals have had to be queued by the multi-agency panels due to insufficient resources. It will also avoid raising clients' expectations before the HIT is in a position to approve a DFG.

- 3.5 The O/T service will then be better able to provide a more responsive service catering to the wider demands for its expertise.
- 3.6 As the HIT will be both the start and end of the DFG process it will be easier to monitor the effectiveness of service improvements (all the relevant data will be in one system) and report the effects on and to end delivery times. This will enable better focus on service delivery.
- 3.7 The existing arrangements are not sustainable. There is confusion as to who is responsible for decision making and the role of the panels. This has led to the council being at risk of judicial review and adverse reports by the Ombudsman.

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS**

- 4.1 Staff across all service areas, members and the public have been increasingly concerned that the delivery of DFG's was too slow and unnecessarily complex. Vulnerable people have been taken into a well-meaning multi-agency matrix that tried to manage the workload effectively rather than respond to individual needs.
- 4.2 The Audit Commission has highlighted the council's poor performance and identified this as an area for improvement in its recent reports.
- 4.3 The existing arrangements are not fit for purpose and need to be replaced.
- 4.4 The proposal arrangements take account of ongoing discussions between the HIT, O/T service, adults and children's services.

#### **5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)**

- 5.1 Staffing – The HIT has sufficient staff resources that can be switched from servicing the multi-agency panels to supporting the new decision making procedures. Overall there should be a reduction in the number of O/T assessments that are required to support the DFG process.
- 5.2 Financial – During the current financial year £500,000 has been diverted from home improvement grants into DFG's to provide a total budget for adaptations of £1,492,000. A decision on the future levels of funding will be taken as part of the council's overall budget setting process in the new year.
- 5.3 Currently the cost of O/T assessments is paid as part of a service level agreement by adult services. There is potential in future to make the HIT responsible for paying for O/T services directly as this is a cost that the government recognises as chargeable against a DFG. There is unlikely to be an overall cost saving to the council for such an arrangement.
- 5.4 There will however be a transfer of cost from social services revenue budgets to neighbourhood and environment's capital programme.

5.5 There are no property implications arising directly as a result of this report.

5.6 The existing computer systems are satisfactory for the new arrangements. In order to help speed up the application process the Home Link service visiting officers are being provided with encrypted scanning pens so that they can take copies of relevant documents in client's homes in a secure manner.

**6. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)**

6.1 Statutory – the council complies with the government's target of determining all valid DFG applications within six months.

6.2 Diversity – the HIT has been working closely with the Local Link services to ensure that the DFG application process is as accessible as possible.

6.3 Risk – The council is exposed to judicial review, ombudsman or other complaints if an effective service is not provided. Clarity on decision-making is essential in order to avoid unnecessary distress to disabled people.

**7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION**

7.1 The proposals and developments set out in this report are the result of discussions with staff, managers and the respective service directors.

7.2 Both North Lincolnshire Homes and the O/T service management have been actively involved in developing the proposed service improvements.

7.3 A meeting held in October between the Head of Housing O/T Service manager and the Every Adult Matters Manager produced the recommendation to revise the role of the O/T's.

7.4 Consultation will continue with the respective service leads for adults and disabled children to improve processes and procedures.

**8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 That the proposals set out in paragraphs 3.1 to 3.6 of this report are approved.

8.2 That further reports on the improvement of the process be submitted at a later date.

SERVICE DIRECTOR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

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**Background Papers used in the preparation of this report**

Audit Commission – Advice and assistance: Feedback on North Lincolnshire Council’s Strategic Housing Services 2009.

Department of Communities and Local Government – Good Practice Guide Delivering Housing Adaptations for Disabled People – June 2006.

The Housing Renewal Grants (Services & Charges) Order 1996.