

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	05/06/2023
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Service Area	Housing
Committee Date	27/06/2023

*To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen*

### Disabled Facility Grants (DFG)

#### 1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report outlines the key service challenges of delivering the Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs).
- 1.2 The report describes the current delivery and considerations once the existing SLA ends in March 2025.

#### 2.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 2.1 The purpose of the report is to outline the growing challenges in delivering the mandatory Disabled Facility Grants (DFG) service and its subsequent impact on an already pressured service.
- 2.2 The report and associated background papers provide detail on the existing arrangements and the requirement to review not only the SLA with RCTCBC (2020-2025) but also the operational arrangements considering its strategic fit and efficiency.

#### 3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The report has been brought to scrutiny to describe the plethora of challenges in the current model of delivery and discuss the current arrangement and how we can improve this to improve and streamline the processes to avoid future complaints and

operate more efficiently given the demands on the housing service currently and the lack of strategic fit.

- 3.2 The report also outlines the current position with regards to DFGs and the 5-year SLA (2020-2025) in place with RCTCBC, and its subsequent SLA with Cwm Taf Care & Repair, with some considerations any future model of delivery post March 2025.

## **4.0 WHERE WE WERE**

- 4.1 In February 2020, MTCBC entered into an SLA agreement with RCTCBC to administer the Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs) on our behalf (with a subsequent SLA between RCTCBC and Care and Repair to carry out some administrative and technical works). This agreement was to administer DFGs up to a maximum of £850,000.
- 4.2 The Disabled Facility Grant Service is a statutory service where £850,000 capital funding is attributed each financial year. This is the only mandatory housing grant issued by the Council and is available for a range of works needed to help a disabled person to remain and live more independently in their home.
- 4.3 The process involves the Community Occupational Therapy Service (COT) working with people to assess their ability to undertake their activities of daily living and where appropriate provide adaptations so that individuals can be as independent as possible. The adaptations (Disabled Facility Grants), such as the provision of wet rooms/extensions, are referred to RCTCBC for those who are owner/occupier, privately renting or Merthyr Valleys Homes (MVH) properties.
- 4.4 The service is located within the Strategic Housing Team which holds the responsibility for supervising the budget, ensuring timely submission of data of the Welsh Government, and establishing connections with future development and housing requirement for individuals who need home adaptations to promote independent living.
- 4.5 The operational delivery is heavily reliant on the COT Team submitting referrals deemed *Necessary and appropriate* to meet the disabled person needs as assessed by the Council's Community Occupational Therapy (COT)Team.
- 4.6 The housing team rely on technical staff from Care and Repair/RCTCBC to award funding for works that are deemed *Reasonable and practicable* depending on the age and condition of the property.
- 4.7 The SLA arrangement has enabled the service to recover from a previous backlog of applications and cope with some of the increased demand we have seen over the past 2-3 years, comfortably managing 40-50 referrals (expected per year) up to the value of around £850,000 and waiting lists were cleared through this partnership approach.

## **5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW**

- 5.1 We have seen a marked increase in the demand for DFGs over the past few years. The table below show the number of referrals by year:

Year	New DFG referrals
2019/20	55
2020/21	43
2021/22	76
2022/23	113
2023/24	Est forecast 168

- 5.2 In addition to the rise in referrals, the escalation in prices of building materials and labour has further compounded the issue, particularly impacting larger grants. This situation has created a challenge as larger grants deplete the budget rapidly, hindering the equitable and fair distribution of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The service spent over £1.73 million in 22/23 through the budget and additional grant monies secured via the Housing with Care Fund, and despite this we are still holding around 70 referrals and the current 2023/24 budget is already fully committed.
- 5.3 Whilst the partnership approach has enabled the service to recover, it is not without its difficulties as we now see unprecedented demand on the limited budget. As more parties are involved in the operational delivery, the management of the service has become more resource intensive. The number of parties involved in each DFG has grown, so any issues mean considerable work for the Housing team in obtaining the relevant information to make decisions reliant on COT and Technical staff, and to respond to queries and complaints is time consuming as most of the information required is held by other departments/partner agencies.
- 5.4 As more clients are referred for DFGs and RCTCBC hold up to £850,000 worth of referrals per year, the Strategic Housing team have plugged the clear gap in resource to manage anything above the £850,000 by way of communicating with clients, managing wait lists, letters (clients and their representatives), dealing with complaints, arranging technical visits to assess suitability for DFGs etc. This is becoming unmanageable without additional resource given the existing pressures on the service and taking staff away from their dedicated roles to support the service which is becoming unsustainable.
- 5.5 The Community Occupational Therapy Service (COTs) consistently receives on average 15-20 referrals per week (up from 4-7 pre pandemic) and liaise at the front end creating a referral for a DFG, the case then gets closed and moved to the Strategic Housing Team to manage wait lists until budget is available to release more referrals to RCT/Care & Repair.
- 5.6 Despite streamlining processes, evolving, and adapting to the growing demand by housing staff taking on additional responsibilities, there continues to be growing pressure on an already challenged service area, with opportunities to work more efficiently, and take more ownership at all levels of the DFG process from all departments involved. In many cases where complaints or queries come in, many clients have been passed between the Community Occupational Therapy (COT) Team, Corporate Complaints, RCTCBC, Care & Repair and Housing evidencing a clear need to operate more efficiently given resource pressures and to better the clients journey.

- 5.7 There are also concerns from Housing around when issues occur, resolving these can be problematic and timely given the varying parties involved from the outset and differing views from a COT and technical perspective which we have seen recently affecting the budget and clients experience significantly.
- 5.8 We also need to consider the most appropriate strategic fit for the service given the strain on resources and lack of corporate finance to increase staffing, to avoid the situation escalating further and putting too much pressure on existing staff, which may detract them from their primary duties and job responsibilities. As part of this evaluation, the lack of technical expertise within the Housing department should be recognised as a crucial aspect in the decision-making process for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs).
- 5.9 Lastly, we need to consider the options going forward on the overall administration of the DFGs given some of the issues aforementioned but also in light of Cwm Taf Care and Repair giving notice to end the SLA at the end of the current period being March 2025, and our partner RCTCBC Grants struggling with their own recruitment of technical staff, commitments in administering the Empty Homes Grants for 14 Welsh LAs, meaning this current delivery option will unlikely be a viable option post 2025.
- 5.10 Also the budget availability has significant impact on waiting lists, client experience and decision making, with price increases meaning many extensions (larger grants) averaging between 45-60k) we need to determine if this is affordable given the current pressures and whether it allows a fair and equitable spread of grant to help the growing demand seen across the Borough.

## **6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE**

- 6.1 Given the pressures across the Authority and particularly within the housing service, we need to ensure an efficient model of delivery, where required expertise are available to inform decision making and all parties involved share ownership and accountability to prevent issues and complaints.
- 6.2 Should there be no additional finance, we need to ensure we set clear expectations on the pressures and demand for the service and the likely wait time for any works, being clear about alternative options such as support to move and operating on a needs basis to prioritise the funds accordingly and operate fairly and consistently to avoid challenge. Single point of contact for clients to make enquiries, discuss any concerns or receive updates on their application.

## **7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT**

- 7.1 It is essential to carefully evaluate whether the current placement of the DFG service within the Council is optimal or if it would be better suited in another department. Regardless of its location, it is evident that there is a growing demand and escalating costs associated with the service. Resource constraints pose challenges in effectively addressing these increases and ensuring the service can adequately meet its obligations.
- 7.2 We need to agree a sustainable model of delivery in the short to medium term given the exacerbated demand, and resource appropriately the support to manage the

service with the much-needed technical support and advice required to manage the service. I have included some initial thinking within the Business Case background paper which also includes more stats and data to provide further context.

- 7.3 We need to consider whether we can continue to deliver large grants (extensions) given the pressures on the budgets, volatility of price from job estimate to completion due to unforeseen costs/works and risk to partner agencies and/or clients in meeting the cost between 36k and the total cost where no additional grant funding can be sought. (Please see previously drafted DFG update report to amend renewals policy and cease extensions for a period of 24months subject to review).

## 8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 Within our recently published Corporate Wellbeing Plan, the DFG service directly influences the Healthier Merthyr Tydfil Objective, to empower people to live independent and dignified lives. The service allows people to maintain their dignity and live as independently as possible through adaptation to their homes to meet their longer-term needs. This also directly benefits family, carers and reduced inappropriate hospital admissions and institutionalised care.

**Alyn Owen**  
**Deputy Chief Executive**

**Cllr Michelle Symmonds**  
**Cabinet Member for Housing & Regeneration**

<b>BACKGROUND PAPERS</b>		
<b>Title of Document(s)</b>	<b>Document(s) Date</b>	<b>Document Location</b>
DFG Service Change Business Case	May 14 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Attached
DFG Update Council Report 2023 (deferred)	February 17 <sup>th</sup> 2023	Attached
<b>Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?</b>		<b>No</b>