



Briefing on Disabled Facilities Grants Developments March 2010

This Briefing provides an overview of the emerging issues affecting the provision of help with home adaptations, including Ombudsman Rulings, Parliamentary Debates, recent reports and forthcoming revised guidance.

1. Overview

- 1.1. Home adaptations can increase independence, help to prevent falls, reduce length of stay in hospital and delay care home admission. But many older and disabled people are waiting years for the adaptations that could improve their lives.
- 1.2. There is a national legislative framework defining eligibility for help with adaptations dating back to the 1970s.
- 1.3. The Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 (Section 2) places a duty on Social Services authorities to arrange practical assistance in the home, and any works of adaptation or the provision of additional facilities designed to secure greater safety, comfort or convenience.
- 1.4. Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) were first introduced in 1990 under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Prior to this legislation financial help with adaptations may have been available through an improvement grant.
- 1.5. The legislative provision for DFGs is now the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. This places a legal obligation on local housing authorities to provide assistance via nationally defined mandatory adaptations grants. Good practice guidance issued by national government sets out how authorities should deliver DFG.
- 1.6. In reality the provision of help with adaptations is highly variable. Some areas operate fast, efficient systems whilst in other places waiting lists for DFG run into years.

2. Emerging Issues

- 2.1. **Declining local budgets:** The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) provides each local housing authority with a specific grant for DFGs. Up until 2008 the local authority was legally obliged to match this grant on a 60:40 basis. Since CLG announced the ending of this grant condition a growing number of authorities have reduced their contribution to the DFG budget, despite growing demand and a year on year increase in national funding.
- 2.2. **Rising demand from the social rented sector:** There is a growing trend for housing associations to advise their tenants to apply to the LA for a DFG. Due to funding changes it is being argued by housing associations that they can no longer afford to undertake or meet the cost of adaptations for tenants. This is further adding to waiting list times.

- 2.3. **Increasing need due to demographic trends and the rise in low income owner occupation:** During the 1980s and 90s many lower income householders became home owners, primarily as a consequence of the Right to Buy initiative and increased access to mortgages. This major social change in housing tenure amongst lower income households, combined with increased life expectancy, is resulting in a rising need for financial help with adaptations.
- 2.4. **The significant correlation between social class and earlier onset of disability** also results in a higher level of need for adaptations amongst low income home owners.
- 2.5. **Social care and health policies** have increasingly shifted towards supporting older and disabled people to live where they choose ie in the majority of cases, independently in their own homes for as long as possible. Community care, intensive care and support packages delivered to people in their own homes as an alternative to residential care have had a positive impact on older people's lives. However, in many cases there is a link to the increase in need for the home adaptations that can enable this care to take place.
- 2.6. **Service user influence over provision, support for carers and the Supporting People programme.** Personalisation, responding to service users' preferences, support for carers and policies aimed at enabling care at or closer to home, all potentially result in increased demand for home adaptations.

3. Recent Publications about Home Adaptations

- 3.1. The report by Care & Repair England, ***Time to Adapt? Home adaptations for older people, the increase in need and future of state provision (2009)***¹, brings together a wide range of key data about potential need for adaptations utilising key data from the housing, health and social care fields. It sets out the key policy and practice issues that are emerging as a consequence of the trends listed in section 2 above.
- 3.2. The report calls for a high profile debate about the roles and responsibilities of the state vs the individual in paying for home adaptations. Care & Repair England subsequently produced a summary paper and gave a presentation at the **All Party Parliamentary Group** (Housing and Care) and is building support for a fundamental system review linked to the wider debate about the future funding of social care.
- 3.3. In their report about the role of home improvement agencies (HIAs) in adaptation delivery, ***Adapting for a Lifetime*** (Jan 2010)², Foundations cited the findings of their survey which revealed that nearly a quarter of local authority DFG budgets were already exhausted, with a further 31% potentially significantly overspent. Over half of agencies are reporting an increase in waiting times for DFGs and 70% are experiencing a rise in demand, with the largest growth rate amongst older people.
- 3.4. How housing associations and local authorities could best work together to deliver home adaptations for tenants is thoroughly dealt with in ***Making it Work Smoothly***³, a joint publication by the housing associations Habinteg, Hanover and Servite.
- 3.5. The DFG Consortium is made up of a wide range of the major national organisations concerned about adaptation provision. It has recently produced a **brochure highlighting both the importance and also issues around DFGs** which will be widely promoted in the run up to the election. (See: www.careandrepair-england.org.uk/pdf/dfgc_broc.pdf)

¹ www.careandrepair-england.org.uk/timetoadapt.htm

² wwwFOUNDATIONS.uk.com

³ <http://www.habinteg.org.uk/documents/Policy%20and%20Practice/HAHomeadaptations.pdf>

4. Ombudsman Rulings

- 4.1. One of the main problems with DFG is that local budgets are often not enough to meet demand. A recent Ombudsman's report⁴ (07/C/01269 & 07/C/09724) was critical of the authority concerned for failing to assist a disabled man who waited three years for a bathroom adaptation. One of the paragraphs is of particular relevance to budgets:

Para 34: 'The District Council had not allocated enough funding to meet the demand for DFGs. It should have identified the problem and considered transferring money into the DFG budget sooner than it did.'

5. On the horizon

- 5.1. Communities and Local Government (CLG) recently commissioned an update of their DFG Good Practice Guidance⁵. Publication is expected in April or May 2010 (this could be delayed by the May elections).
- 5.2. An announcement about DFG allocations to LAs for 2010-11 is still awaited. The total funding from CLG to LAs for private sector housing in 2010-11 is being cut nationally by around 25%. Consequently, some LAs are looking to cut local DFG budgets still further.

6. Commentary

- 6.1. The DFG system stands at a crossroads, caught up in the contradictions that arise from a philosophy of new localism vs theoretical universal entitlement.
- 6.2. There is an understandable absence of public clamour over this issue. The disabled older people who are most affected are all too often isolated and worried about being told they can't stay in their own homes, so they are the least likely group to make a fuss.
- 6.3. Government, both local and national, sees older home owners as a group with assets that they could and should draw on in older age. Equity release is frequently cited as *the* solution, despite evidence concerning its shortcomings and unpopularity.
- 6.4. Rising levels of disability and a strong desire for independence amongst older people are, however, not going to go away. Highlighting the value and benefits of state help with home adaptations and trying to retain some assistance for vulnerable people remains important, but in the absence of effective systems it may be down to the third sector to do what it can to initiate new low cost adaptation solutions.
- 6.5. Creative, simple adaptations linked to handyperson schemes, recycling (especially of stairlifts), impartial advice and technical information about the least costly adaptation options and innovation of new low cost solutions, such as flat pack ground floor bathrooms, could all help low income disabled people who wish live reasonable lives in their own homes for as long as possible

This Briefing was produced by Care & Repair England March 2010

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⁴ <http://www.lgo.org.uk/complaint-outcomes/social-care/social-care-archive-2009-10/lincolnshire-county-council-07c01269-amp-west-lind/>

⁵ www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/deliveringhousingadaptations