

## Paper 1

### Minister for Housing and Regeneration

#### Written Evidence to the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee's Inquiry into Home Adaptations

1. I welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Committee's Inquiry and will address its terms of reference in the order that they are stated in the Chair's letter of 11<sup>th</sup> December 2012.
  - *Why there are still significant variations in the time it takes to deliver aids and adaptations funded by Disabled Facilities Grants across Wales;*
2. The independent report published by CEL Transform in October 2010, which was commissioned in response to the Equality of Opportunity Committee's 2009 Report, presented a positive picture overall and concluded that there had been a "**sustained and significant improvement in the average time taken to process Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) across Wales**". The report also referred to an increased emphasis on the quality of service provided with more attention being given to a "**balance between speed, customer participation/control and the quality of the outcome**".
3. Whilst I recognise that there are variations across Wales, overall, delivery times for DFGs have improved in general and are still getting better. The general trend across Wales is for faster delivery. The time taken to deliver DFGs as measured by the established Performance Indicator (i.e. number of days taken to complete a DFG) shows a 45% improvement since 2006. The average time has reduced from 593 days down to 325 days. This means that the average time to complete a DFG is well within the statutory timescale set out in the DFG legislation (the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996).
4. The Performance indicator itself was:
  - developed in conjunction with local authority practitioners;
  - measures the process from end to end, which reflects the experience of the client; and
  - encourages local authorities to take corporate responsibility for the delivery of DFGs rather than at an individual departmental level.
5. It also needs to be made clear that delays are not always caused by local authorities either in terms of assessing a person's needs or in processing grant applications. There are cases where delays have been caused by the grant recipients themselves because they have taken additional time to decide to have the works done because of the disruption involved. Other delays arise when a person decides not to choose to use an approved builder suggested by the local authority and takes time to find their own contractor to carry out the necessary works. As the timeline starts when

the initial enquiry is made, these delays are reflected in the overall time it takes to complete the works. We need to take a balanced view on this issue and recognise the hard work that local authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association have done to bring the waiting times for DFGs down.

6. The Welsh Government also introduced a one-off initiative in 2011-12 in the form of the *Independent Living Grant*. £1.5 million was secured to fund adaptations for people who were either on a waiting list for a DFG or needed works done to return home from hospital. The grant was delivered through Care & Repair working in partnership with local authorities, was not means tested and was available up to maximum of £10,000. Because the grant was so successful a further £1 million was secured to fund it at the end of 2012-13. The success of the grant and its take-up has led us to consider how it could be funded in the future. This is something I will be looking at in the context of the review of adaptations services that was announced in the Housing White Paper last year.
  - *Whether sufficient progress has been made on implementing recommendations from the Equality of Opportunity Committee's report on home adaptations;*

### **Minor Adaptations**

7. Progress has been good over a range of areas including the delivery of DFGs which is alluded to above. Significant progress has also been made in terms of the delivery of minor adaptations. Many more straightforward items are now being provided outside of the more complicated statutory DFG system and this is common practice amongst the majority of local authorities. The 2005 independent report on the delivery of adaptations and DFGs recommended this course of action.

### **Good Practice**

8. It is quite readily apparent that there is an abundance of good practice information available to local authorities, and the independent report published by CEL Transform in October 2010 confirmed that this is the case. In addition to the Welsh Government revised guidance (new Annex D to National Assembly for Wales Circular 20/02) we have the Benchmarking Reports, which were revised by the WLGA in 2009. Local authorities also exchange information informally and through more formal means such as the all-Wales Heads of Environmental Health Technical Panel. The Welsh Government will continue to work with local authorities and other representative bodies to ensure that examples of good practice are circulated widely and signposted effectively.

### **Publicity**

9. Satisfaction levels amongst DFG recipients appears to be generally high but the Welsh Government needs to ensure that assistance reaches all

those who could benefit from it and this is part of the reason why we provide core funding for Care & Repair services across Wales. The quality of information provided by local authorities as the main delivery agents is vital. It is encouraging to see the examples of good work such as road shows and publicity events such as Care & Repair week, the latest of which occurred quite recently. It is crucial that this access to information is maintained especially in the current financial climate that we find ourselves in. Awareness of the available service has also been enhanced by the joint leaflet that was produced by Age Cymru, Care & Repair Cymru and the College of Occupational Therapists specifically for Wales. This built upon the information that was published by Age UK at a wider level.

### ***Adapted Housing Registers***

10. The Welsh Government is still of the opinion that a single National housing register would not be beneficial. There is already a growing move towards common housing registers within each local authority for access to social housing. The Welsh Government encourages local authorities and housing associations to set up Accessible Housing Registers, which include both people and property databases. Their primary objective is to assist the matching of available property with the needs of people with disabilities seeking housing. In addition, they have the potential to enable the authority to make best use of existing resources (i.e. the adapted property), avoid unnecessary spending on adaptations and assist planning of future housing. The Welsh Government's revised guidance on housing allocations recommends that this is the case as it has greater potential to increase communication and access to adapted housing within the immediate community.

### ***Occupational Therapist Services***

11. It is encouraging to note that the number of occupational therapists (OT) has risen in Wales since the Committee published its report in 2009. Information on the Stats-Wales website shows the whole time equivalent of OTs has risen from 216 in 2009-10 to 242 in 2011-12. Some local authorities also have specific housing OTs and this has enabled them to speed up assessment and DFG application processes.

### ***Home Maintenance Services***

12. Local authorities have the powers to provide assistance for home maintenance under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002. The Order requires each local authority to publish a housing renewal policy which sets out what forms of assistance are available to homeowners in its area. The policies are available for the public to scrutinise and are also available in summary form upon request. Most of the current published policies cover the issue of home maintenance.

## **Funding**

13. Funding for DFGs has remained relatively static. In 2011-12 it was £34.9 million across Wales and represented almost two-thirds of all the money spent on private sector renewal during 2011-12. Any proposals to improve adaptations services have to be seen within the context of the current financial climate. Funding for DFGs is not ring-fenced and comes out of unhypothecated local authority General Capital Funding (GCF).

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

14. It is important to point out that the Welsh Government does not set budgets for DFGs across Wales. It is for individual local authorities to determine how much to allocate for adaptations purposes. DFGs remain a mandatory entitlement but with increasing pressures on budgets, spending on adaptations will have to compete even more with other local authority priorities. As a mandatory entitlement, expenditure on DFGs will be protected to some degree but other activities may be affected such as grants for home improvement and other forms of assistance for homeowners. There could be an impact on waiting lists because of the squeeze on resources and these will have to be carefully managed. Under the present economic circumstances local authorities will inevitably concentrate on their statutory duties and this will include the provision of DFGs.

15. This is part of the reason why additional funding for the Independent Living Grant has been provided as outlined above. The grant was introduced on a one-off basis but we have been able to provide £2.5 million over the last two financial years to help mitigate against the effects of the cuts in funding. The budget for the Rapid Response Adaptations Programme (RRAP) has also been protected in order to maintain the impact of this important service. In addition, the Welsh Government has managed to minimise the impact of budget cuts on Care & Repair and has protected agency front-line services from the effect of the cuts that had to be made.

- *Is the Welsh Government effectively monitoring the provision of adaptation services; and*

16. The Statutory Performance Indicator mentioned above provides information on delivery of DFGs. We also receive detailed information on spend on DFGs through statistical bulletins that are prepared by the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Advisory Service. Adaptations are a regular feature of discussions with the Welsh Local Government Association and the all-Wales Heads of Environmental Health Technical Panel.

17. My officials also receive regular updates and reports on the delivery of RRAP and numbers of people helped by Care & Repair services across Wales. Indeed, the latter information forms part of our Programme for Government tracking indicators. Overall, we gather a large amount of information which informs policy on adaptations and helps us to ensure that services are provided effectively.
- *What more needs to be to improve home adaptation services in Wales.*
18. Whilst I recognise that services vary across Wales, improvements have been made to service delivery and I think that this fact needs to be highlighted. We are in a much better position than we were in 2006, for example, and there are some very positive stories to tell. However, I recognise that we need to consider service delivery and adaptations generally and this is why the Welsh Government announced, in the housing White Paper, that there would be a review of the range of aids and adaptations programmes to see whether there is scope to make further improvements.
19. Although a seminar has taken place where local authority housing and social services departments, Care & Repair, Occupational Therapists and other interested parties discussed the current provision arrangements, the review has been put on hold until the Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee publishes its findings as a result of this inquiry. It seemed prudent and sensible to do this.
20. One of the most important things that can be done in terms of improving the existing service is to re-emphasise the importance of corporate working on the part of local authorities where adaptations are concerned. We need to highlight the fact that this is a key issue and there may be a role for the Welsh Local Government Association to work with us to get this message across more strongly. There are of course areas where the requisite corporate approach works well and it may be just a question of sharing good practice at a number of levels.
21. There are positive stories to tell and it is far too easy to dwell on some negative aspects of the services that are currently provided. Hopefully we can make further improvements to the current system so that services are improved for the Citizens of Wales.

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