

Communities, Homes and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Task & Finish Group Report 2023-24

ADAPTATIONS POLICY

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Carmarthenshire
County Council



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1 Members of the Task and Finish Group



Cllr Deryk Cundy (Chair)
Labour



Cllr Betsan Jones (Vice
Chair)
Plaid Cymru



Cllr Ken Howell
Plaid Cymru



Cllr Martyn Palfreman
Labour



Cllr Russell Sparkes
Plaid Cymru



Cllr Hugh Shepardson
Independent

2 Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present the report of the Communities, Homes and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee's Task and Finish Group established by the Committee in September 2023 to undertake a review on the operation of the Council's Adaptations Service within the Community Department's Housing Property and Strategic Projects Division to examine both the current backlog of work and processes with a view to improving service delivery.

Members of the Committee, at that time, felt the review of the existing operation to be important to address the backlog and to identify means of improving service delivery for both the public and contract holders (tenants)

As part of the review, we examined the current legislative duties placed on local authorities, under the Housing Grant Construction and Regeneration Act 1996, and the Children's Act 1989, to provide adaptations for those who qualify for a Disabled Facilities Grants, and the increasing number of adaptation applications being received set against financial and staffing resources. The review also covered adaptations undertaken to the Council's own housing stock.

I hope the recommendations we have made will deliver improvements to the operation of the Adaptations Service and achieve a reduction in the current backlog of work.

I am very grateful to my fellow members of this group for their input and commitment during this review.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the officers who have provided specialist advice and support throughout.

Councillor Deryk Cundy
Chair of the Task & Finish Group

3. The Task and Finish Review

At its meeting held on 28th September 2023 the Communities, Homes and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee agreed to establish a Scrutiny Task & Finish Group on the operation of the Council's Adaptations Service within the Community Department's Housing Property and Strategic Projects Division to examine both the current backlog of work and the processes with a view to improving service delivery for both the public and contract holders (tenants).

In selecting this topic for review the committee identified that:

- The Council has a statutory duty under the Housing Grant Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 to provide adaptations for those who qualify for a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG). Adaptations for Council Tenants are provided according to the same framework as DFGs.
- The provision of adaptations can assist with timely hospital discharge and can help prevent accidents such as trips, slips and falls thereby also assisting the social care sector by reducing the need for homecare and residential care.
- The number of requests for adaptations had increased significantly and that with an aging population it was anticipated that demand would increase in the future.
- The increase in demand had resulted in a backlog of clients awaiting an Occupational Therapist (OT) to assess the applicant and the technical officer to cost and order the work.

Main Scope and Aims of the Group

The main Scope and Aims of the group were agreed as follows:

- To focus on reviewing the current policy and current high demand for the services and to contribute to the development of a new Home Adaptation Policy.
- To discuss the current demand for home adaptations
- To discuss the current service delivery model
- To consider the impact of removing the means test for Disabled Facilities Grants
- To examine the resources available, budgetary and staffing, required to meet demand.

Membership of the Task & Finish Group

The Communities, Homes and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 15th November. in agreeing to the Task and Finish Group's Terms of Reference. also agreed that the Group's membership will comprise 6 Elected Members appointed to reflect the political balance of the Council as a whole, as far as possible, with the members appointed being:

- Councillor Deryk Cundy (Chair)
- Councillor Betsan Jones (Vice Chair)
- Councillor Ken Howell
- Councillor Martyn Palfreman
- Councillor Russell Sparkes
- Councillor Hugh Shepardson

The Democratic Services Unit, based in the Chief Executive’s Department provided general support to Group.

The Following Officers provided specialist advice and support during the Group’s review:

- Jonathan Fearn – Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects
- Robert Evans – Home Improvement Agency Manager
- Carolyn Seabourne – Home Improvement Team Leader
- Paula Sadler – Senior Practitioner (Occupational Therapist)
- Gareth Miller – Business Transformation and Programmes Manager

Attendance by members of the Task and Finish Group is shown below. A total of 5 meetings were held during the period December 2023 – May 2024

Scrutiny Member	Meetings Attended
Deryk Cundy (Chair	5
Betsan Jones (Vice	5
Ken Howell	4
Martyn Palfreman	5
Russell Sparks	1
Hugh Shepardson	3

4. SERVICE OVERVIEW

1. Aims and Purpose

The Home Adaptations Service sits within the Housing Property & Strategic Projects Division in the Communities Department providing home adaptations via the Disabled Facilities Grant (for homeowners and private rented properties) and within the Council's Housing Stock.

The Service's aims are to:

- Help People stay well at home for longer.
- Give people choice and control over their health and wellbeing.
- Help people to have access to the wider community.
- Prevent or reduce the risk of fall.
- Reduce the need for formal/informal or residential care.
- Avoid unnecessary hospitalization.

2. Budgets

To deliver the above aims, the service has an operational budget for 2023/24 of £5.297m comprising:

- Disabled Facilities Grants - £2.7m
- Welsh Government Enable Funding - £368k.
- Housing with Care Fund (HCF via the Regional Partnership Board) - £100k
- Addition DGF's from the Welsh Government via the HCF - £192K
- Council Property Adaptations - £2m.

3. Legislative Framework

Disabled Facilities Grants are the only national mandatory grants available, with all other types of assistance being at each Local Authority's discretion with the statutory duties for the provision of adaptations being laid down in the following legislation/policies:

- Housing Grant Construction and Regeneration Act 1996.
- Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014.
- Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order (2002).
- Housing Adaptations: Wales Audit Office (2018).
- Housing Adaptations: Report of the Public Accounts Committee (2018)
- Welsh Government Housing Adaptations Service Standards 2019

- A review of Independent Living Adaptations: Welsh Government (2015)
- Housing and Disabled People: Equalities and Human Rights Commission (2018)

Within the provisions of the Housing Grant Construction and Regenerations Act 1996, (being the Primary Legislation) Sections 23 and 24 detail the types of works eligible for the award of a mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant together with the obligations on a local authority for the granting of an award.

Section 23 – Eligible Works

1. Facilitating a disabled persons access to:
 - a) The dwelling
 - b) A room usable as the principal family room, or for sleeping in
 - c) A WC, bath, shower etc (or the provision of a room for these facilities)
2. Facilitating the preparation of food by the disabled person
3. Improving/providing a heating system to meet the disabled person's needs.
4. Facilitating the disabled person's use of a source of power
5. Facilitating access and movement around the home to enable the disabled person to care for someone dependent upon him or her.
6. Making the dwelling safe for the disabled person and others residing with him or her

Section 24 – Local Authority obligations for the award of an application

(3) A local housing authority shall not approve an application of a grant unless they are satisfied:

(a) that the relevant works are necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of the disabled occupant; and

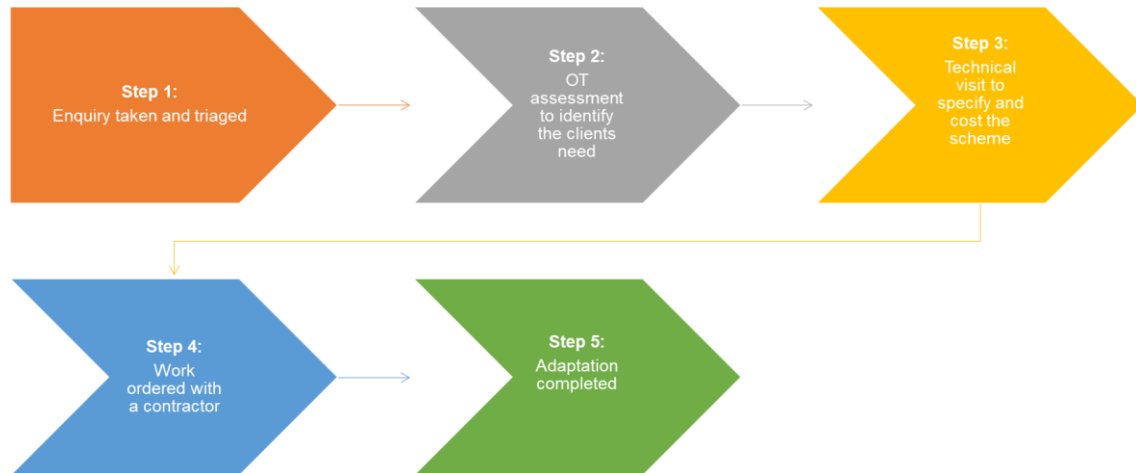
(b) that it is reasonable and practicable to carry out the relevant work having regard to the condition of the:

- (i) the dwelling, qualifying houseboat or caravan or
- (ii) the building

Adaptations for Council Homes would normally be provided to the same framework as Disabled Facilities Grants.

4. Summary of Process and Types of Adaptation

The processing of applications for the award of both Disabled Facilities Grants and Adaptations to Council Homes follows the following 5 step process:



When applications are assessed, they are categorised into three size categories - small, medium and large - cost of works and to whether those are means tested i.e.

Small – not means tested

- Handrails / Grabrail
- Platform Steps
- Small Ramps
- Key Safes
- Level Taps

Medium – Not means tested

- Stairlifts
- Accessible Showers
- Ceiling Track Hoists
- Larger ramps
- Wheelchair accessible parking

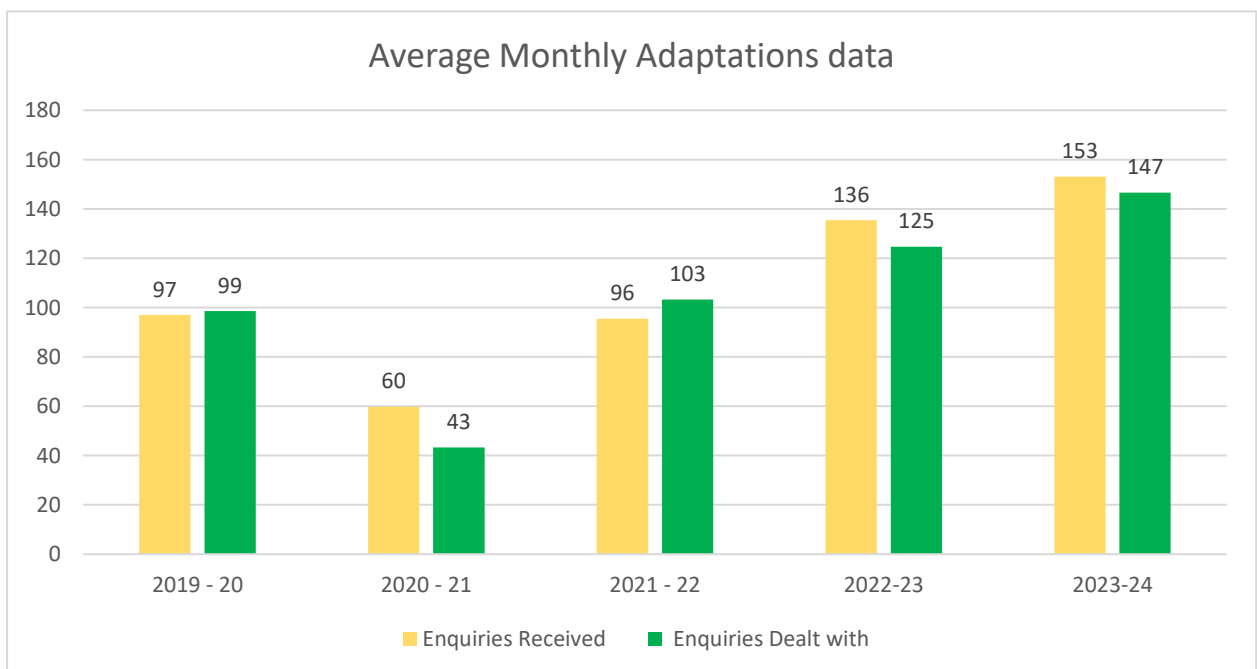
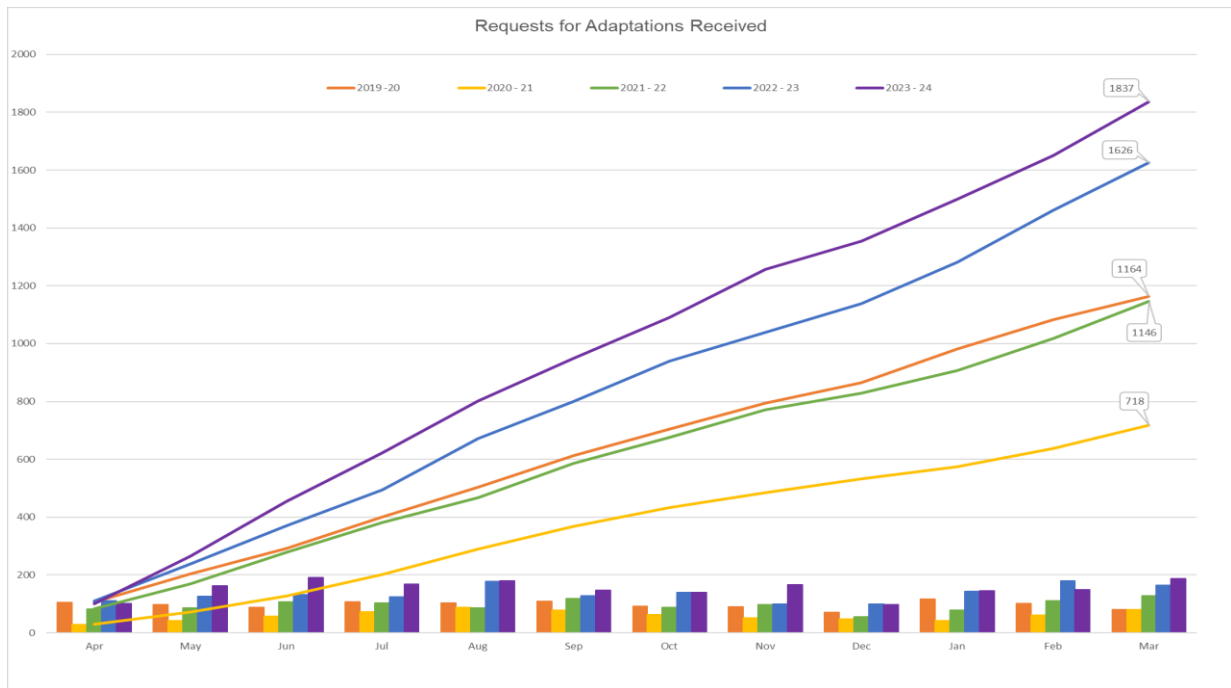
Large – Means Tested

- Internal Structural alterations
- Extensions
- Through floor lifts

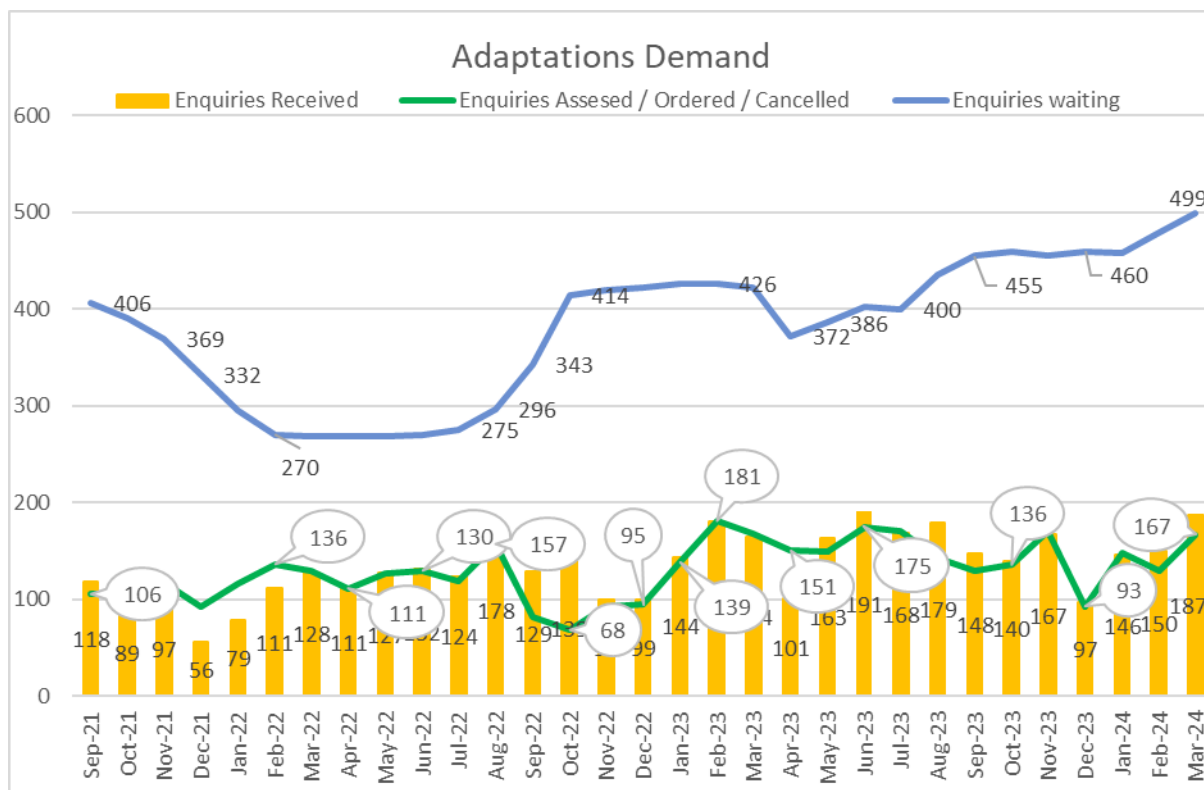
5. SERVICE DEMAND AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Service Demand

The Adaptations Service has seen an increased demand for home adaptations over the previous five years, with the noticeable exception being for 2020-21 where a drop in demand occurred, corresponding with the initial Covid-19 lockdowns introduced by the UK and Welsh Governments



This increase in demand has resulted in the service experiencing a back log of enquiries with 499 enquiries awaiting an Occupational Therapist assessment and a consequential impact on the delivery times.



Current Timeframe for Delivery

	Council Property Adaptation (Council Property)		Disabled Facilities Grant (Private Property)	
	Average number of Days	Number of Adaptations completed	Average number of Days	Number of Adaptations completed
Large	743	5	667	6
Medium	353	103	372	177
Small	92	280	16*	1178*

*Delivered via Care and Repair Carmarthenshire

Future Challenges

The Group noted the current, and increasing demand, for adaptations, for both private and council properties is creating challenges for the service going forward presenting in a few different ways:

1. Staffing

The Group enquired about the current staffing resource available to deal with DFGs and Adaptations. The Group was advised that the current staffing complement within the Adaptations team totals 15 and the increasing levels of adaptation applications being received is creating a strain on the unit with staff having to work overtime to process. While the overtime is helping address the high level of applications, the Group recognised it was not sustainable and expressed concern about the impact on the wellbeing of the Team. The Unit was reliant upon overtime to ensure that all available funding was utilised.

The Group noted that, whilst the current staffing complement was under pressure, an officer decision report was being prepared for additional staffing using the funding currently used for overtime and additional income generated. The Group wished to make a clear recommendation that additional resources were essential to ensure that the service was sustainable.

<p>RECOMMENDED That staffing is reviewed to ensure adequate resources are available to deal with the ongoing high demand for the Service</p>

2. Housing Occupational Therapists (OTs)

The Group discussed the role and the need for Housing OTs and how this role is recognised as a specialist role within the Royal College of Occupational Therapy. The Housing Senior Practitioner OT meets regularly with OT leads from Health and Social Care to provide expertise and knowledge around housing adaptations and contribute to a seamless service for the applicant/patient. A report by Public Health Wales in 2019 Making a Difference Housing and Health: A Case for Investment states that for every £1 invested in home adaptations generates a £7.50 cost saving for health and social care.

Officers from the Home Adaptations Team also attend fortnightly Touchpoint meetings with colleagues in the hospitals to expedite hospital discharge. Membership of these meetings include discharge liaison nurses, Housing Options staff, and Home Adaptation staff with the objective to ensure that we are proactive when it comes to hospital discharges. Also, the team has become increasingly involved with the ambulance service to support them when needing to transfer bariatric patients.

The Group discussed the value of delivering timely adaptations to facilitate hospital discharge with the cost of a general hospital bed being approximately £350 per day. A hospital discharge delayed by approximately 3 weeks would equal to the cost of installation a wet room shower costing £7,000.

In addition, adaptations prevent unnecessary hospital admissions as they reduce the risk of accidents such as trips, slips and falls and maintain the client's independence. Adaptations can also help support the social care sector by reducing homecare and the need for residential care. With current demand for homecare, adaptations have a vital role to play in releasing capacity to deliver more homecare.

3. Contractors

The Group noted that difficulties were being encountered in engaging contractors to undertake adaptations for council properties under the current framework arrangements with contractors 'batching' works in areas to undertake in one hit as opposed to piecemeal to maximise returns, with the consequential effect of the timeframe for works being delayed. It was however hoped the new contractor framework being developed would address that aspect.

Other measures to reduce delivery times could involve the establishment of an in-house team to undertake works similar to that introduced by the authority to reduce void times.

4. Care and Repair Carmarthenshire

In addition to directly commissioning contractors, the council also has a Service Level Agreement with Care and Repair to undertake small adaptations in private sector. The Authority fund the small scale adaptations and Care and Repair deliver via their in-house practical services team and external contractors who assist with meeting the high demand

The Group discussed the role of Care and Repair with the Chair of the Group, the Cabinet Member for Homes, the Head of Housing Property and Strategic Projects, and the Home Adaptation Manager all sitting on the board of Care and Repair Carmarthenshire which ensures a strong link between Care and Repair and the County Council.

Care and Repair is co-located with the Home Adaptations Team in the Eastgate office and work in partnership to provide a service to customers applying for disabled facility grants and small scale adaptations to support private sector residents retain independence in their own homes.

During 2023 / 24 Care and Repair completed 1,627 small scale adaptations however only 54% were completed by the Care and Repair in-house practical service team with the

remaining 46% installed by external contractors employed by Care and Repair. Care and Repair charge a 10% administration fee for all adaptations completed.

5. Means Testing

In March 2021 a written statement by the Welsh Government Minister for Housing and Local Government, Julie James A.M., announced measures to remove the means test for small and medium Disabled Facilities Grants and had requested Local Authorities to use their powers under the Regulatory Reform Order 2002 to make DFGs for small and medium adaptations available without a means test.

Carmarthenshire County Council's Cabinet approved the use of that power in February 2022. After that decision, the Authority had seen an increase in requests for adaptations part of which could be attributed to the removal of the means test. Given the increasing demand for DFGs, the Group considered the potential advantages / disadvantages of re-instating the means test as a method of managing demand and limiting grants to those who could not afford the required adaptations. With that in mind, the following three options were considered.

Option 1 – Continue with no means testing for small and medium DFGs and monitoring the impact for a further 12 months.

Option 2 – Re-instate means testing for small and medium DFGs whilst accepting that action would result in a reduced allocation of Enable funding (£122,763) from the Welsh Government

Option 3 – Re-instate means testing for medium DFGs only and discuss the impact on additional funding with Welsh Government.

The Group, having considered the above options, had regard to the pressure being placed on the budget by the increasing numbers of grant applications being received and was of the opinion some form of means testing should be re-introduced to help assist with controlling the increasing applications being received.

Having come to the above conclusion, the Group considered the merits of whether to recommend the re-introduction of means testing detailed within options 2 and 3.

The Group noted that regarding the small grant applications they were limited to minor works such as handrails/grab rails, Platform steps and small ramps etc and could at a small cost not only improve quality of life but also act as a preventative measure in reducing falls for example and the subsequent call on hospital and social services. Those works would also help to reduce the potential escalation and fast tracking of grant works

to a medium or large scale. Accordingly, the Group was of the opinion means testing should not be introduced for small DFG's.

Regarding re-introducing means testing for medium grants, the Group noted that following the removal of the test in February 2022 the Council had received 65 repeat grant applications totalling £574,928 from applications initially not progressed by the applicants. It was therefore felt that given the current demand for grant, the Council should consider re-introducing means testing for medium DFGs.

	Number of applications	Largest DFG	Average DFG	Total Cost	WG Enable Funding
2022 / 23	34	£ 23,813.88	£ 8,552.88	£ 290,798.00	£ 122,763.00
2023 / 24	31	£ 20,832.48	£ 9,165.48	£ 284,130.00	£ 122,763.00

RECOMMENDED that the Council considers re-introducing means testing for medium scale Disabled Facilities Grants

6. Council Property Traffic Light Policy

Carmarthenshire operated a blanket policy, known as the 'Traffic Light Policy' whereby it would not undertake adaptations to a council property if that property was categorised as a red property. The current assessment classifications being:

- **Green Property** – adaptable and viable for a wheelchair user.eg
 - (1) Has an approach which can be easily adapted for access by a wheelchair?
 - (2) Has a level approach which can currently be accessed by a wheelchair.
- **Amber Property** – partially adaptable and may suit applicants with some minor mobility problem e.g.
 - (1) Has an approach with some incline with possibilities to adapt to suit wheelchair access?
 - (2) Has an approach which may incorporate graded platform steps?
- **Red Property** – not adaptable or suitable for people with mobility problems e.g
 - (1) Has an approach that is unsuitable for use by a wheelchair user.
 - (2) A disabled applicant could not access or egress without significant assistance.
 - (3) The topography and gradient make it impractical or uneconomic to adapt.

With the above in mind, the Group considered the following three options for the future provision of adaptations for council properties:

Option 1 – Continue with the current Traffic Light Policy and not provide any adaptations if safe access is not achievable at the property and request the tenant to move to a more suitable property;

Option 2 – Provide only small adaptations, as an interim measure and ask the tenant to move to a more suitable property;

Option 3 – Consider the needs of the tenant as an individual case and provide the required adaptations if the circumstances warranted.

The Group having considered the above options, was of the view the current traffic light policy used to assess the suitability of council homes for adaptation should be replaced by option 3 with the aim of meeting tenants' individual needs and to provide the required adaptations if the circumstances warranted. Accordingly, the Group agreed to the adoption of the following template against which applications could be measured:

	Category	To be considered	Yes/No
What matters to the tenant	Goals/objectives	Can the works support the disabled person's roles and routines, including looking after others or supporting carers looking after the disabled person?	
Identified needs	Long-term & sustainable	Will the works provide a long-term solution to meet the need(s) and future use?	
Achievable in the Environment	Type of adaptation	Can the adaptation be achieved within the property.	
	Economic	Will the works provide value for money in reducing/minimising care costs?	

If the answer was no to any of the above, suitable alternatives should be considered, which may include alternative housing.

AGREED that the current Traffic Light Policy used to assess the suitability of a council property for adaptations be replaced with Option 3 above being aimed at meeting tenants' individual needs and to provide the required adaptations if the circumstances warranted.

7. Foster Children Placed by another Local Authority

The Group considered the council's current approach for the award of DFG's for adaptations to be undertaken where a foster child was placed in Carmarthenshire by another local authority. It was noted that, currently, foster children were entitled to apply for DFG under the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 with a

maximum mandatory grant in Wales of up to £36k with any excess being funded by the placing authority.

The Group was informed that whilst other local authorities in Wales awarded such grants Carmarthenshire's approach was that prior to any grant award, the placing authority must first demonstrate the initial placement was appropriate as required by Section 22c of the Children Act 1989 and if not, then the placing authority should fund the whole cost of any required works. However, as that approach was not formally detailed within the current policy, the Group considered the following provision should be made within the Adaptations Policy to address that issue:

Foster children are entitled to apply for DFG funding under the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (HGCR) with a maximum mandatory grant in Wales of up to £36,000. However, Section 22c Children Act 1989 states that if a child is disabled, the placing local authority must ensure that the accommodation provided:

- Is suitable to meet the child's current diagnosed and anticipated long-term needs;
- Is consistent with the child's care plan; and
- Does not cause an overcrowding issue as stated in Carmarthenshire County Council's Social Housing Allocations Policy Appendix 4

Before a DFG application would be accepted, the Placing Local Authority must demonstrate and evidence how the property met the above criteria on placement and how circumstances have since changed.

AGREED that the Council's Adaptations Policy include the above section relation to the award of DFG's to foster children placed within Carmarthenshire by another local authority.

8. Grant Conditions

The Group noted that conditions set out within the Disabled Facilities Grants (Conditions relating to approval or payment of grant) General Consent 2008 (Wales) provides that where the cost of a DFG exceeds £5,000 a charge will be placed on the adapted property whereby the full amount of a grant can be reclaimed minus the first £5,000 within 10 years from the date of the Completion Certificate. In accordance with that provision, the Group considered the inclusion of the following wording within its Adaptations Policy detailing the Council's approach to when a grant repayment would be required and the exemptions to that policy.

Grant Conditions requiring repayment of a Grant.

The group considered the following proposed 3 conditions to be applied for the repayment of a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) together with 3 proposed exemptions thereto i.e.

Conditions for repayment:

- 1 Where a disposal of the property takes place or,
- 2 There is a breach of the grant conditions in respect of grant aid or,
- 3 There is a breach of grant conditions that apply throughout the period of 10 years from the date of the Completion Certificate (the Certified date)

Exemptions:

1. The extent to which the recipient of the grant would suffer financial hardship were he or she to be required to repay all or any of the grant.
2. Whether the disposal of the property is to enable the recipient of the grant to take up employment, or to change the location of employment.
3. Where the applicant of the grant must sell the property to receive care.

Cases where the council may wish to consider not requesting repayment of grant shall be considered by the Home Adaptations Team Manager and requests for exemption must be made in writing to The Home Adaptations Team, Carmarthenshire County Council with full details supporting the request that the grant repayment be waived.

AGREED that the above provision detailing the circumstances for the repayment of grant and exceptions thereto be detailed within the Council's Adaptations Policy.

9. Priorities v Demand

The Group discussed prioritisation of enquiries and the difficulties given that the local housing authority has a statutory duty under legislation to provide adaptations for the those who qualify for a DFG. It was identified that the demand for DFGs has seen year on year increases since 2019/20 with the spend for 2023/24 having exceeded its allocated budget. Since 2019 the number of applications received has increased from under 1200 to more than 1800 for 2023/24 with the total spend for 2023/24 being £2.85m exceeding the available budget of £2.78m. On top of the increasing demand the 2024/25 budget would be £400k less than that provided for 2023/24.

5 Year Budgets						
	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Disabled Facilities Grants (General Fund)	£2.78m *	£2.3m	£2.0m	£2.5m	£2.5m	£2.5m
Council Property Adaptations (HRA)	£2m	£2m	£2m	£2m	TBC	TBC

* Includes carry over from 2022 / 23

Because of this increasing demand and reducing budget, the group examined how it could prioritise cases within the identified budget and examined the following four options:

1. Divide the budget between the triaged groups:
 - Priority 1 - Fast track - £500k
 - Priority 2 – High £1m
 - Priority 3 – Standard £500k
2. Divide the budget between type of adaptations:
 - Small scale - £500k
 - Medium - £1m
 - Large - £500k
3. Prioritise on the longevity of the adaptations use
4. Prioritise medium adaptations over large adaptations:
 - have a planned programme of large-scale adaptations which would result in applicants waiting several years for the required works to be completed.

The Group in considering the prioritisation of applications, was of the view it would be difficult for it to form a conclusion on, and to recommend, any formal wording on prioritisation within the Adaptations Policy. Accordingly, it considered that as the approval of grants should be made on need, the Council's professional officers were best equipped/qualified to make those assessments.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Group, having examined the current processes and demand on the Adaptations Service, came to the following conclusions and recommendations.

Conclusions

1. The Adaptations Service was facing increased demand for Disabled Facilities Grants resulting in a back log of applications awaiting processing.
2. Current staffing resources were contributing to the back log of applications but that a business case was being prepared for additional staff.
3. The removal of means testing for medium scale DFG's had resulted in an increased demand for grants and that it's re-introduction could reduce both the level of that demand and the resultant call on diminishing resources and the Council's Cabinet should consider re-introducing means testing for medium scale applications. If adopted, that would result in a loss of WG grant funding of £122,763. However, based on the last 2 year's data on

repeat applicants because of the removal of means testing, this would result in a net increase in budget of £164,701 per year.

4. The terms of the award of a DFG' to a foster child placed within Carmarthenshire by another local authority should be clearly set out and detailed within the Council's adaptations policy.
5. The terms for the requirement of repayment of a DFG and any exceptions thereto should be clearly set out within the Council's Adaptations Policy.
6. The current Traffic Light System used to assess the feasibility of a council property for adaptations should be replaced with a system based on meeting an individual's need if the circumstances warranted as set out within option 3 in this report.
7. That while the demand for DFG's was of concern, the decision on the prioritisation of grants awards based on need should be undertaken by the Council's professional officers.

Recommendations

1. The Council's Cabinet be requested to consider re-introducing means testing for medium scale Disabled Facilities Grants.
2. That the amended Draft Adaptations Policy, attached as Appendix 1 to the report, incorporating the Groups' suggested amendments for change be adopted subject to the Cabinet's consideration of recommendation 1 above.
3. Grant Repayment Conditions on all DFGs over £5,000 if the property is sold within 10 years of completion of the adaptation with only the following exemptions:
 - Financial hardship
 - Moving for employment reasons
 - Moving into residential care
4. Adaptations for foster children placed in Carmarthenshire by another Local Authority will only be considered if the criteria in the policy are met.
5. That staffing is reviewed to ensure adequate resources are available to deal with the ongoing high demand for the Service.