

Review Committee – 27 July 2011

Minutes of the meeting of the **Review Committee** held on **27 July 2011** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs J R Lumley
Vice-Chairman: Mrs H L A Glynn

Cllr Mrs P Aves
Cllr Mrs A V Hale

Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr I H Ward

VISITING MEMBERS

Cllrs Mrs G A Lucas-Gill and M Maddocks.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Cllr R D Pointer.

OFFICERS PRESENT

J Bourne	-	Head of Community Services
S Neville	-	Strategic Housing Manager
P Gowers	-	Overview and Scrutiny Officer
M Power	-	Committee Administrator

193 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

194 DISABLED FACILITY GRANTS – PROCESS REVIEW

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Community Services on the process involved in administering Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs).

It was noted that the DFG budget of £250,000 comprised £100,000 from Rochford District Council (RDC) and £150,000 from Central Government.

The Head of Community Services provided greater detail on the application process for the DFGs, as outlined at Appendix A in the Report, as follows:-

- Following receipt of the Occupational Therapist recommendation an initial test of resources is carried out, which is not a full means test but can give an early indication as to whether a grant may be payable. There is also an initial visit to the residence to evaluate the works being recommended and to ascertain if it will be reasonable and practicable to carry out these works on this site. A schedule of works is also drawn up at this stage and then the application pack is sent out.

- All applicants have access to assistance from the Home Improvement Agency (HIA), who will work with them throughout the process and provide help with completing and submitting the application form.
- When the application form has been received the contents will be checked and any missing information will be requested.
- When the grant has been approved and works completed, inspections will be undertaken by RDC to ascertain the works meet the required standard and match the specification.

It was noted that there are various unexpected issues that may occur that will delay the process and impact on the timescale.

In response to Member questions, the following responses were provided:-

- Although access to funding under the Rochford Home Maintenance and Adaptation grant (RHMAg) for moving house is contained within the RDC policy it has not been used for this purpose to date. This grant can be used to assist a disabled person in finding alternative accommodation if their existing home is not suitable for adaptation and can be used to top up the DFG, in addition to its main use of funding general repair works, not linked to DFGs. The Council is reviewing the RHMAg to consider lowering the maximum grant available to each applicant to open the grant facility to a greater number of people.
- Although the majority of applications are from homeowners, Housing Association tenants are entitled to apply for a DFG. However, Housing Associations have their own aids and adaptations budgets which can be used for this purpose. Private tenants must have confirmed permission from the landlord for works to be completed on the property. All applicants will be means-tested using a standardised Government-set formula of incomings/outgoings unless they are in receipt of certain specified benefits.
- The HIA is contracted by ECC to provide general housing and home improvement advice to applicants and also to offer a service in respect of DFGs for works over £7,000 in value in return for a fee. To date, this fee has been 15% of the grant contract value. Following the recent ECC tender process, the HIA contract is no longer provided by Springboard, but in its place it is now the Papworth Trust and a new service level agreement for DFGs is being developed. It is anticipated that under this new agreement the HIA will assist also with applications where grants are less than £7,000.
- The approximate total shown in Appendix A of £130,000 relates to completed grants for 2010/11; commitments to works are not included in this amount. The Council operates a 'roll-over' process whereby, although the budget is fully committed, it is not necessarily paid within the same year. This means that even in years where the £250,000 budget is fully

committed, grant applications will continue to be processed. There have been no years when the money has been unspent.

- The OT will give each application a priority rating of 1, 2 or 3. DFGs are mandatory grants with set time limits of a maximum of six months to approve the works and then 12 months to complete the works from approval of grant.
- The average time taken in 2010/11 from the start of the application process to completion of the works was 40 weeks, which is a 20% reduction on the average during the previous year of 50 weeks. However, the Council is aware that improvements can be made and the process is reviewed on an ongoing basis.
- The Papworth Trust is keen to work in conjunction with the Council to run an efficient service. Negotiations around a revised SLA with the Papworth Trust will examine what improvements can be made to the system to achieve an improved application process. The Council will continue to look at aspects of the process that are in its direct control, including working directly with other Divisions within the Council that can provide information in order to streamline the process.
- By the end of the current financial year it is hoped that the SLA agreed with the Papworth Trust will have bedded in and there should be a good understanding of any improvements that can be made to the process. However, a faster processing time could result in the creation of a waiting list as there is a limited budget.
- There is an approved list of contractors for the various works, which is held by the HIA. However, the issue historically has been an insufficient number of quality contractors and the HIA have been working to remedy this situation by getting more contractors involved. The Council has to approve the contractor's work before grant monies will be released. Unforeseen additional works sometimes can delay the process.
- Ancillary fees, such as planning/survey/architect fees, are eligible to be included as part of the grant.
- Where possible stair lifts are used, although where wheelchair access is required a lift through the floor would be installed. A recycling project has been established for installed equipment that is no longer required. Equipment that has been installed is the property of the grant applicant.
- Although technically there is no limit to the number of grant applications that may be made, there is generally just one application, to a maximum value of £30,000, from each household. Social Care/RDC have the discretion of providing a top-up to this grant.

- Historically, delays in the initial assessment of what works may be needed have been caused by a lack of qualified OTs available to undertake assessments.
- Individual grant cases from previous years could be examined to establish reasons for the variance in time between the commencement of the grant process and completion of the works. This may show certain trends or common factors that result in an earlier/later finish date. It is believed that the time between grant approval and completion of the works is where the savings in time can be made. Delays that are as a result of an applicant's decision to postpone works for any reason should also be included as part of the analysis.
- People who have been admitted to hospital due to major health issues will have to go through the application process in the usual way to qualify for a grant for disabled alterations to their home. The hospital OT will complete the survey in the usual way. If necessary, RDC has the discretion of using its local grant to assist in this situation in the interim. Hospital discharge procedures can be explored further with the Papworth Trust as part of the ongoing SLA negotiations.

Members expressed concern that some of the delays occurring in the grant process are longer than necessary, which affects vulnerable members of society. An analysis of where delays occur could be examined during negotiations with the Papworth Trust.

Members felt they now had a better understanding of how the current grant application process operates and believed that there is potential for improvement. Further information and clarification on certain points would be requested from the Head of Community Services.

Members requested a more detailed analysis of the information on the 2010/11 grants that had been provided in the Appendix to the report.

It was agreed that an analysis of the satisfaction survey questionnaire completed by grant applicants would be provided to Members. Each Member of the Review Committee would be provided with a full set of the forms that an applicant would need to complete as part of the application process.

The next stage in the review would be to request that officers from the Home Improvement Agency (Papworth Trust) and Rochford District Council as well as representatives from the County Council's Occupational Therapy Services meet with Committee Members for further discussion.

Resolved

That the contents of the report be noted and be used to inform the review of the Disabled Facility Grant process.

The meeting closed at 9.11 pm.

Chairman

Date

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