

Briefing Paper – West Suffolk Council Housing Assistance Policy: Decision to Amend

1. Summary

1.1 The Portfolio Holder for Housing and Strategic Health is planning to make a decision to amend the West Suffolk Housing Assistance Policy to increase the maximum threshold of the Fast Track Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) from £7,500 to £15,000.

1.2 Contained within this briefing:

- Context to this report – The Housing Assistance Policy and Fast Track DFG
- Summary of Fast Track DFG performance
- Challenges
- Risks
- Fast Track DFG – the future

2. Fast Track DFG - background

2.1 West Suffolk Council has responsibility for the administration of Disabled Facilities Grants, which are funded through the Better Care Fund. We have developed a successful Suffolk wide partnership – Independent Living Suffolk (ILS) and streamlined the process by which to deliver adaptations to enable residents to continue to live within their own homes.

2.2 Historically adaptations to homes could only be funded through the classic mandatory DFG process, which required applicants to have been referred by an OT (Occupation Therapist), have undergone a means test and obtained two quotes. The maximum amount for this grant and conditions are set by legislation and haven't been updated in several years. The maximum grant available is £30,000.

2.3 The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 allows DFG funding to be used more flexibly as part of wider strategic projects to keep people safe and well at home and ensure a streamlined approach to the administration of grants. The Homes Assistance Policy explains clearly how we facilitate DFG funding.

2.4 In 2020/21 we established a Fast Track DFG, designed to speed up the DFG process for those simple, relatively low cost, routine adaptations, and maximise our impact to the wider healthcare system:

- Preventing hospital, care home or residential home admissions, and
- facilitate prompt discharge of residents from hospital

2.5 The Fast Track DFG application process stripped away specific time-consuming and resource intensive requirements of the mandatory DFG. Applicants can

access the grant with a referral from any health professional (OT, GP, physiotherapist, district nurse, hospital discharge nurse), only need one quote, and do not require a means test. At present the maximum grant available is £7,500.

3. Summary of Fast Track Performance

- 3.1 Throughout 21/22 – the Fast Track DFG has lived up to its name and enabled the Council to facilitate adaptations faster and with greater efficiency.
- 3.2 The average end-to-end time for a Fast Track grant is 13 weeks – (the quickest grant was just 2 days), in comparison the end-to-end time for mandatory DFG is 25 weeks. This is calculated from referral to completion. For the Fast Track DFG this is representative of the customer being told they need an adaptation and then getting one. For mandatory DFG the resident will have to wait for a specific OT referral to confirm this before they can apply.
- 3.3 Fast Track DFG now accounts for 75% of DFG grants with a spend of £629,831.40.
- 3.4 The Fast Track DFG is essential to delivering our objectives of:
 - Helping as many of our residents as possible, as quickly as possible to get the adaptations they need to remain independent in their own homes.
 - Maximising the impact of the DFG allocation to our residents within the budget year.

4. Challenges identified under current policy:

Costs are increasing

- 4.1 We are finding less complex, common works are starting to come in above the maximum level of the grant. The ongoing impact of Covid and increasing energy costs has impacted across all services and Contractors. Cost of works are steadily increasing, and we anticipate that prices will continue to rise over the next year(s).
- 4.2 50% of all Fast Track grants are between £5001 - £7,500 and there is no headroom for an increase in prices and little buffer for occasional unforeseen works (which has resulted in delays completing works).

Impact to customers and the customer journey:

- 4.3 Where works exceed the maximum threshold of the grant, vulnerable applicants are then left with the choice to either:
 - 1. Self-fund the deficit
 - 2. Wait for a SCC OT referral and make a full mandatory DFG application.
- 4.4 Mandatory DFG require two quotes, a means test and an OT referral, which all delay the process and progressing an adaptation which is much needed. These additional requirements delay the progress of a grant however, the length of delay is currently compounded by:

- i) Current resourcing of OT provision across Suffolk, which is unsatisfactory. Waiting list for OT assessment is now running at six months. West Suffolk have >100 customers currently waiting for an assessment.
 - ii) The means test has not been updated since 2008 and has not kept pace with the increasing costs residents are faced with. Ultimately applicants that fail the means test may still struggle to self-fund works. 6 applicants in the year 21/22 failed the means test.
- 4.5 The difference to a resident able to access the Fast Track and those that can't is currently exacerbated by these factors which are outside of our control. Our end-to-end times only reflect the customer journey with West Suffolk Council. Customers unable to access the Fast Track DFG could be waiting months to years in the process of obtaining an adequate assessment and referral from SCC.

5. Resourcing the increase to grant threshold proposal

- 5.1 Disabled Facilities Grants, including the Fast Track DFG, are funded through an allocation made to local authorities by central government through the Better Care Fund. The allocation for 2022/2023 is £1,454,537.

6. Risk associated with the proposal

6.1 Risk of not increasing the threshold:

- i) Customers are waiting longer for adaptations as they are pushed into the mandatory DFG route to access a higher threshold grant (£30,000).
- ii) Cost of works are continuing to rise – works completed now via a Fast Track will be cheaper than works completed in six months time via a mandatory DFG.
- iii) Lose the flexibility and swiftness the Fast Track offers in supporting hospital discharge and prevention work.
- iv) Fewer adaptations processed – reliant on SCC OT assessment process.

6.2 Risk from increasing the threshold

- i) The budget is finite. Although we continue to have an underspend, the success of the Fast Track is assisting us spend the budget faster than in previous years. Increasing the threshold may lead to the budget being spent and waiting lists.
- ii) Means test is circumvented – despite the means test not keeping pace with the cost of living there may be the occasional works delivered to an applicant with sufficient funds. The DFG and particularly the Fast Track is a grant vehicle that aims to prevent costs to the NHS (access to which is not means tested) thereby the risk is considered to be low whilst the wider gains/savings to the public purse is significant.

7. Fast Track DFG Vision

- 7.1 Proposed amendment to increase the maximum threshold of the grant will ensure the grant remains available for use for those less complex, common works, as prices and inflation rise. In doing so we enable our residents to

remain living independently in their own homes for longer, improving their quality of life and reducing the burden on the health service and social care services.

8. Appendices referenced in this report

- 8.1 Appendix 1 – The existing West Suffolk Council Housing Assistance Policy under the Regulatory Reform Order 2021-2026

9. Background documents associated with this report

- 9.1 None