



Is the disabled facilities grant service providing an effective response to user needs?

Vale of Glamorgan Council

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Status of report

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The team who delivered the work comprised Steve Barry and Ron Price of the Wales Audit Office and Ginette Beal of Grant Thornton.

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Summary report

Summary

1. Since 2009, the Council has steadily improved the average number of calendar days taken to deliver a Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) but improvement by other councils meant that it had remained amongst the poorest performers in Wales. The Council has recently reported improvement in the average time taken to deliver a DFG in 2014-15. Averages for other councils in Wales in 2014-15 are not yet published but this latest performance could be sufficient to place the Council amongst the better performers in terms of the time taken to deliver a DFG.
2. In November 2011, we published a report which included a series of proposals for improvement identifying a need to improve both processes and the strategic planning of the service. Progress was checked in March 2013 when we identified partial implementation of our proposals for improvement in relation to processes but no development of a strategic approach to the delivery of the service.
3. Our project brief posed the question: 'Is the disabled facilities grant service providing an effective response to user needs?' The purpose of this review being to provide further insight about the DFG service by undertaking an analysis of the arrangements at better-performing councils and identifying practices that the Council might adopt to drive a step improvement in delivery.
4. This review also exposed weaknesses in Council arrangements for planning and evaluating the impact of a broader range of activities intended to meet its corporate objectives of assisting independent living. We will therefore provide another report to illustrate these issues. Resolving these weaknesses will require improved cross-service strategic planning and evaluation of a wider range of information about the resources being deployed and the results being achieved for service users and potential service users.
5. We conclude that: **The Council has met its original objective of improving the speed of delivery of DFGs but evaluation focuses on a narrow range of information and service planning is not sufficiently strategic** because:
 - the focus on time targets for key stages in the process has improved delivery times and there appears scope for further refinement of processes;
 - performance evaluation has been based upon a narrow range of indicators and there is scope to utilise other service-related data to provide a better picture of performance; and
 - the Council lacks a strategic plan for the service and data review suggests a probable future reduction in the number of disabled facilities grants at a time when the Council forecasts increased demand.

Proposals for improvement

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| P1 | Implement a process review that assesses arrangements from the service user perspective and has regard to the implementation of change by other councils. |
| P2 | Establish a broader range of measures that enable the effectiveness of the DFG service to be evaluated in terms of meeting user needs and the efficiency of resources being deployed as well as monitoring the speed of delivery. |
| P3 | Adopt 'plain English' principles to assess revisions necessary to current guidance documents and future publications/advice for service users. |
| P4 | Introduce measures that can be used to establish a corporate understanding of the way in which the service and others contribute to supporting independent living. |

Detailed report

The Council has met its original objective of improving the speed of delivery of disabled facilities grants but evaluation focuses on a narrow range of information and service planning is not sufficiently strategic

The focus on time targets for key stages in the process has improved delivery times and there appears scope for further refinement of processes

6. Since December 2008, the Council has sought to reduce the average time taken to deliver DFGs. Over the years, the focus has been on improving processes to reduce the average time and in this respect improvement has been achieved by the reduction from an average delivery time of 1,046 days in 2008-09 to 284 days in 2013-14. The Council reports that the average delivery time reduced further in 2014-15, and is expected to be 199 days. At the time of writing, comparative figures for other councils are unavailable for 2014-15.
7. In order to provide further insight for the potential for further service improvement, we reviewed approaches taken by other councils in Wales reported to be delivering DFGs more quickly. We are satisfied that those we selected to review are recording elapsed time in the same way as the Council.

Council processes have been changed and there is potential for further improvement

8. One council (Council 'A') in particular achieved a significant improvement in performance, reducing the average delivery time from 530 days in 2011-12 to 244 days by 2012-13. Our analysis of change implementation by Council 'A' indicated a number of factors behind improvements including:
 - giving priority to a fundamental re-design of arrangements to focus on meeting service user needs with less focus on elapsed delivery time as a means of assessing the service;
 - assigning responsibility to one housing surveyor for the whole process (including abandonment of an 'agency' arrangement); and
 - use of 'in-house' rates for works (monitored by comparing rates with other councils) speeding up the process because grant works were no longer put out to tender.

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9. In order to compare processes, having confirmed the point when each council 'started the clock' in respect of the performance indicator, we broke the DFG process down into three key stages:
- **Occupational Therapist (OT) assessment.** Being the time taken from contact by the client to OT assessment, resolution of that assessment and referral for grant application. Council process information indicates this took an average of 101 days in 2013-14. This was 21 days quicker than the time taken by Council 'A'. However, another council indicated an elapsed time of 46 days with enquiries taken by a social services duty desk and initial telephone contact by an OT. For 2015-16, a target of 53 days has been set, based on reported performance of 54 days in 2014-15.
 - **Grant application and approval.** Being the time taken to complete the application form, means test and approve the application. For this stage, we also looked at arrangements for appointment of a contractor. Council information indicates this stage took an average of 113 days in 2013-14. Council 'A' completed this stage in an average of 106 days, the main difference being the time taken over the tendering process at the Vale of Glamorgan. Council 'A' has also significantly reduced the detail sought in its application form – reducing the application form from in excess of 30 pages to five pages. For 2015-16, the Council has set a target of 72 days based on reported performance of 74 days in 2014-15.
 - **Grant approval to completion of works.** Being the time taken to complete all works following grant approval. Council information indicates this stage took an average of 77 days in 2013-14. Council 'A' reports an average of 31 days. For 2015-16, a target of 62 days has been set, based on reported performance of 63 days in 2014-15.
10. The Council has changed its process, bringing the means testing of applicants earlier in the process in order to reduce workload and demand. This change reduces demand as the majority of applicants who do not qualify for financial support now withdraw from the process much earlier. These individuals are still entitled to an assessment by an OT and, we are informed, will be directed to other organisations who may be able to help, such as Care and Repair. However, the Council is not aware of the impact of this change and how it affects a person's ability to continue to live independently in their own home – only that it reduces demand for a DFG.

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11. The Council has implemented some changes that have resulted in improvements but others remain to be implemented:
- means testing brought to beginning of process – implemented;
 - framework contracts – implemented;
 - OT location along with other appropriate professionals in a dedicated DFG team – implemented;
 - joint assessments, OT and surveyor – trialled but considered not effective by staff; and
 - service re-engineering – final stage process review undertaken January to March 2015.

Performance evaluation has been based upon a narrow range of indicators and there is scope to utilise other service-related data to provide a better picture of performance

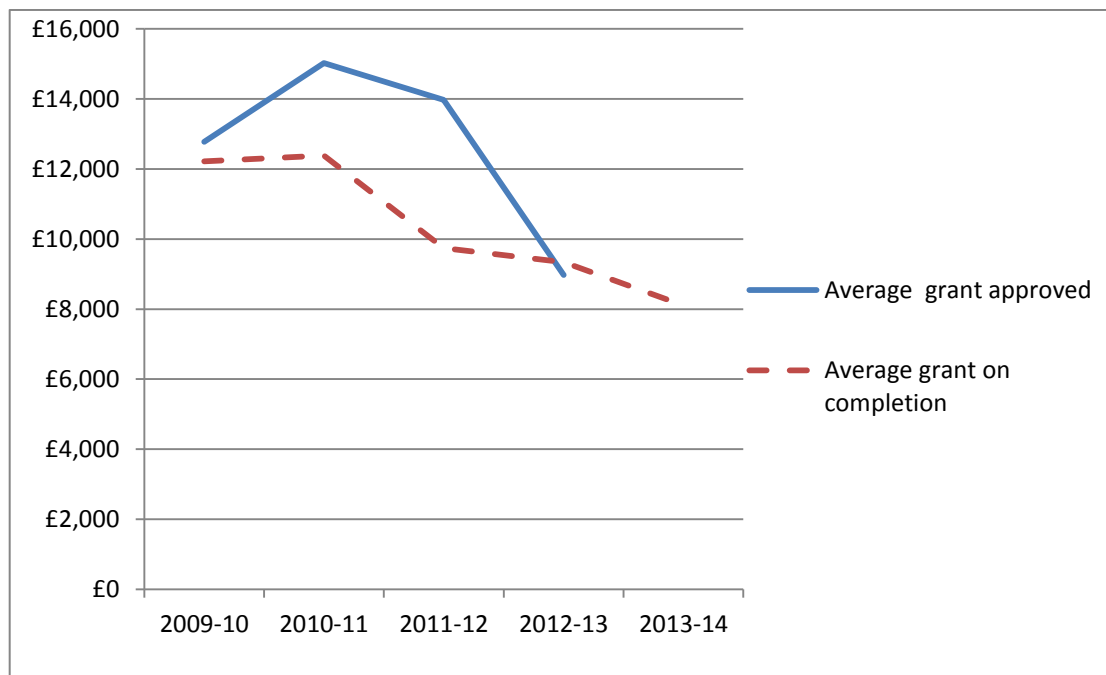
12. Because of the Council's wish to improve the speed of delivery, the Development Directorate performance report breaks down DFG processes into component elements setting time targets for each element and reporting against them. Whilst this undoubtedly helped focus the service on improving delivery times, it does not provide a balanced picture of performance.
13. The same report for quarters one and two of 2014-15 were presented to the Cabinet, the Housing and Public Protection Scrutiny Committee and the Health, Social Care and Well Being Scrutiny Committee. Whilst each of these member forae had an interest in the effectiveness of arrangements, the reason for adopting such a multiple reporting arrangement, about the same topic was unclear, and although it enabled a wider group of members to access information, it also meant senior officer time was required to provide the same report on three different occasions.
14. Benchmarking with other councils can enable identification of possible opportunities for improvement but the sole focus on delivery times by the Council, whilst driving improvement of this indicator, appears to have become a barrier to the development of a wider understanding of the quality of what is in place and the impact being achieved in meeting service user needs.

Use of a wider range of information can provide a better picture of performance

15. Other information is available that would provide a broader perspective of performance. For example, data shows in 2013-14:
- The value of the average completed grant in the Vale of Glamorgan was £7,920; the average value of grant in Council 'A' was £9,173.
 - In the Vale of Glamorgan 135 grants were completed; in Council 'A', 295 grants were completed.
 - The Vale of Glamorgan Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff establishment (including OTs) dealing with DFGs was 9.5 compared to 10 FTE in Council 'A'.
 - In 2013-14, the average delivery time for a DFG in the Vale of Glamorgan was 284 days compared to 204 days in Council 'A' which 'starts the clock' at the same time as the Council.
16. Council 'A' therefore appeared to be delivering more grants, more quickly, with a similar number of staff. Looking forward, the Council's service plan for 2015-16 indicates a reduction to seven FTE staff delivering the DFG service. Our findings suggest a need to determine why the other council appears to be able to deliver more with similar staff resources.

Exhibit 1: The value of grants approved and completed 2009-10 to 2012-13

The total amount of grant approved and grant paid on completion by the Council has been reducing in recent years.



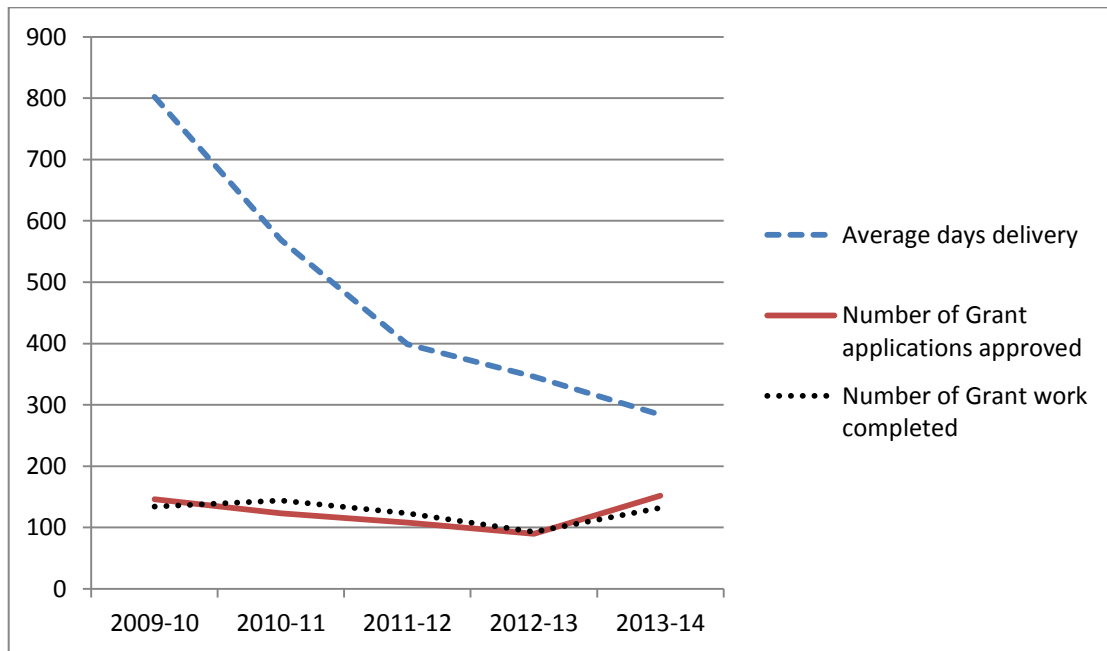
Welsh Government StatsWales

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17. Since 2009-10, the amount of grant approved and paid on completion by the Council has been falling. **Exhibit 1** shows the published data for the period 2009-10 to 2013-14 (data for the amount of grants approved in 2013-14 has not been published by StatsWales). Published data shows that the Council paid £1,637,031 for completed grant works in 2009-10 compared with £1,069,298 in 2013-14. Recent reports by Council officers indicate that 163 grants to a value of £1,209,103 were approved in 2014-15.
18. This means that since 2009-10, when inflation is taken into account, in real terms¹:
- the value of the amount that the Council has paid as grant for completed DFGs works has fallen by 42 per cent;
 - whilst having been relatively constant the value of the budget, in real terms, has fallen by 22 per cent; and
 - the indicative grants budget for the future is likely to continue to fall in value.
19. The average grant approved and paid on completion has also fallen over time. In 2009-10, the Council paid an average of £12,217, with 134 grants having been completed. In 2013-14, the average grant was £7,921 with 135 grants being completed.
20. In any one year, the number of valid grant applications and the actual value of works required will be difficult to anticipate so, in practice, there is a need to make assumptions about average grant levels and make adjustments during the course of the year to manage budgets.

¹ As measured by UK Treasury GDP deflators March 2015.

Exhibit 2: Average delivery time compared with number of grants approved and completed 2009-10 to 2013-14

The improvement in delivery times has not led to any significant change in the number of grants approved or completed.



Welsh Government StatsWales

21. **Exhibit 2** shows that although delivery times have improved significantly since 2009-10, the number of applications approved and the number of grants completed over the period has not changed significantly. In 2009-10, the Council approved 146 grant applications, this fell to 90 in 2012-13 and rose to 152 in 2013-14. Council figures for 2014-15 indicate 163 grants having been approved.
22. In 2009-10, grant work was completed at 134 properties; in 2013-14, work was completed at 135 properties. The result appears to be that whilst people are not waiting as long as in the past, the numbers assisted to live independently have not significantly changed. This raises a potential issue for the future if the demand for social care increases as the Council expects.

Limited information is available to enable full evaluation of the DFG service from the service user's perspective

- 23.** The service asks those who have received a DFG whether they were satisfied with the service, and whether they feel the assistance has made them feel safer and more independent in their own home. Recent reports to scrutiny committees showed:
- In 2014-15, 98.73 per cent of DFG recipients were reported as satisfied with the service compared to 100 per cent in 2013-14. A target of 95 per cent has been adopted for 2015-16.
 - In 2014-15, 96.3 per cent of DFG recipients felt the work had resulted in them feeling safer and more independent in their own home compared to 97.73 per cent in 2013-14. A target of 95 per cent has been adopted for 2015-16.
- 24.** Service targets for 2015-16 were proposed at Housing and Public Protection Scrutiny Committee on 17 June 2015. Although rejecting the 90 per cent target proposed and recommending 95 per cent as the target, the result is an aim for performance to be less than that achieved in 2014-15.
- 25.** The purpose of a DFG is to give disabled people better freedom of movement into and around their home, and to access and use essential facilities within it. Setting the target that 95 per cent of people should feel safer and more independent as a result of the work seems at odds with the Council's wish to support independent living, as well as with the prime purpose of a DFG. For this indicator in particular, it would seem more appropriate to set a target that 100 per cent of recipients felt the work had resulted in them feeling safer and more independent in their own home. This would prompt a focus on those believing the DFG had not assisted and an exploration of the reasons for this.
- 26.** The service also provides a breakdown of the number of enquiries for DFG that did not progress, along with the reason. This amounted to 52 per cent (161 people) in 2014-15. What is not clear from reports is if the enquiry was from someone who needed support and, although not eligible, or not pursuing a DFG, whether that individual was routed to a service able to assist. Current user information is sought from those who have successfully negotiated the DFG process rather than establishing whether Council arrangements are assisting independent living for those not eligible for the DFG process.
- 27.** Supporting more people towards independence remains an improvement objective for 2015-16 and the Council proposes to continue to use the average number of calendar days taken to deliver a DFG for adults as a measure of progress.

Limited information is available for people in need about how the Council is able to assist independent living

28. Information about DFGs is available on the Council's website. The website provides an overview, the type of work available, how to apply, how the grant is calculated and how the grant will be paid. The Council has also recognised a need to improve information for potential applicants. The service has developed **Guidance and Priorities for the adaptations of homes of people with impairments** a 31-page document intended to explain the DFG process. It contains a lot of detail but is not written in a way which can be easily understood by a 'non-expert' reader; for example, page five of the guidance advises that: 'Fixed equipment and/or adaptations will be provided with the aim of removing an environmental barrier, which might otherwise contribute to, and/or increase an individual's dependence upon formal or informal support services, and/or require inappropriate admission to care'. There is scope to apply 'plain English' principles to this guide.

The Council lacks a strategic plan for the service and data review suggests a probable future reduction in the number of disabled facilities grants at a time when the Council forecasts increased demand

29. In its Corporate Plan 2013-17, the Council has adopted the housing priority outcome that 'residents have access to affordable, good quality, suitable housing and housing advice and support'. It set the following objective for the housing service in 2014-15:
- to assist people to live independently in their homes by reducing the time taken to deliver DFGs and delivering the Accessible Homes Policy.
30. In January 2015, the Council adopted its new Housing Strategy 2015-2020. The Housing Strategy expects an increase in the numbers of people aged 65 and over living in the area. The projection is that numbers of people in this age range will increase by 60 per cent from 23,266 (in 2011) to 38,473 by 2036. The expectation is that this will lead to a larger population with long-term disabilities and a growing demand for adaptations. The Council's Housing Strategy says: 'with the growing demand for adaptations, it is primarily the DFG service which supports people to remain in their own homes by providing individualised adaptations to their home'.
31. The Council has set a capital budget for DFGs of £900,000 for 2015-16 with a forward indication of continuing this level of funding until 2019-20. This means that the Council has been steadily reducing the budget allocated to DFGs since 2009-10 when its revised budget was £1,430,000. Whilst in practice the Council has supplemented the DFG budget during the year by utilising other uncommitted capital funding, such a practice does not facilitate efficient service planning when directorates are expected to produce service plans that have regard to budget available.

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- 32.** Although strategy documents identify the potential for increased demand, data shows that the improvement in delivery times has not led to any significant change in the number of grants completed. If the average value of a completed grant remains at £7,921, then the budget of £900,000 per year will allow for completion of 114 grants, meaning there is a possibility that in the future 20 fewer households each year will be supported to live independently.
- 33.** In previous annual reports, we have advised the Council that its performance reporting arrangements needed to be improved so that it was able to evaluate the outcomes arising from its activity. This analysis of DFG arrangements, alongside observation of scrutiny arrangements, has identified limitations in performance reporting not only because of a focus on limited service-specific information but also in respect of the Council's ability to evaluate the results of cross-service activity. We are providing a separate report on the corporate lessons emerging from our focus on DFGs.

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