

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny review of disabled facilities grants



February 2016

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“The grant is mandatory for those who **need better freedom of movement** into and around their home”

Glossary

BCF	Better Care Fund
CCG	Clinical Commissioning Group
CEDM	Community and Economic Development Manager
DFG	Disabled Facilities Grant
EHM	Environmental Health Manager
FM	Finance Manager
GCC	Gloucestershire County Council
HA	Housing Association
HIA	Home Improvement Agency
HTO	Housing Technical Officer
OT	Occupational Therapist
SHM	Strategic Housing Manager
SVHS	Severn Vale Housing Society
TBC	Tewkesbury Borough Council

2. Introduction and background to the report

2.1 Disabled facilities grants (DFGs) help towards the cost of essential adaptations to homes to enable applicants to live more independently. The grant is mandatory for those who need better freedom of movement into and around their home, up to a maximum of £30,000 per applicant. It is subject to a financial means test. It is a statutory function delegated to local housing authorities in England, with Tewkesbury Borough Council's (TBCs) Environmental Health section administering locally. To apply for a grant, applicants will first need to be assessed by an Occupational Therapist (OT) from Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) who will find out if a major adaptation best meets the customer's needs.

2.2 The council receives financial support to deliver the service but in addition, current budgeted capital expenditure is £220,000 per annum.

2.3 At Transform Working Group held on 13 November 2014, a paper on DFGs was presented, with the outcome being to refer a review of DFGs to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This was due to changes in the way DFGs were financed, the cost of adaptations, the number of different agencies involved and the increasingly ageing population.

2.4 It was felt appropriate that an Overview and Scrutiny Committee Working Group be formed to review the council's approach to dealing with DFGs. The subject area meets the key criteria for undertaking a scrutiny review:

- The issue impacts upon one or more sections of the community.
- The issue is strategic and significant.
- The scrutiny activity can add value to the process and should lead to effective outcomes.
- It is a community concern.

2.5 Members were informed that DFGs helped towards the cost of essential adaptations to homes to enable applicants to live more independently. It was felt that it was an appropriate time to undertake a review of the council's approach to dealing with DFGs. It was recommended that a small working group be established to conduct the review with the membership drawn from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and including the Portfolio Holder for Clean and Green Environment, which covers Environmental Health.

3. Terms of Reference

Introduction

An Overview and Scrutiny Working Group will be asked to work with officers to review the council’s approach to dealing with DFGs.

Purpose of the Review

The working group will be asked:

1. To gain a clear understanding of;
 - a. The statutory and discretionary processes involved in allocating grants and how they are applied locally.
 - b. How grants are funded (including comparisons with other local authorities).
 - c. What agencies are involved in the processes and what role they fulfil (including the involvement of registered providers).
 - d. The potential use of previously adapted properties.
2. To consider the council’s current approach in administering grants, in particular how current practices impact on those who could or do benefit from applying.
3. To look at good practice elsewhere, especially those that provide cost effectiveness and good customer satisfaction.
4. To determine possible ways in which processes can be improved.

Who should we consult?

- Relevant council officers (e.g. Environmental Health, Housing, Finance).
- Other agencies involved in the delivery of services (e.g. OTs, Safe at Home home

improvement agency (HIAs), works contractors etc).

- Service user representatives.
- Housing providers (e.g. registered providers).
- Neighbouring authorities/good practice authorities.

Support

- David Steels - Environmental Health Manager
- Kevin Wood - Environmental Health Technician
- Corporate Services.
- Democratic Services.

How long will it take?

Aim to start review in September 2015 and complete by December 2015.

Outcomes

To deliver;

- An efficient system.
- Best value for the council.
- Appropriate levels of support for disabled residents.

4. Membership and methodology of the task group

4.1 Membership of the task group was:

- Councillor Mrs G F Blackwell
- Councillor K J Cromwell
- Councillor T A Spencer
- Councillor Mrs P E Stokes
- Councillor J R Mason (the Lead Member for Clean and Green Environment.)

4.2 The work of the group was supported by officers across the council and external bodies including Severn Vale Housing Society Ltd (SVHS), and GCC.

4.3 The task group met on 24 September 2015, 30 November 2015 and 28 January 2016. Update feedback was given to meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee after each meeting.

5. Findings

What is a Disabled Facilities Grant?

5.1.1 Mandatory DFGs were first introduced in legislation in 1989 and are available (subject to a financial means test) for essential adaptations to give disabled people better freedom of movement into and around their homes and to give access to essential facilities within the home. The types of work that mandatory DFGs cover is:

- Making it easier to get into and out of the dwelling by, for example, widening doors and installing ramps.
- Ensuring the safety of the disabled person and other occupants by, for example, providing a specially adapted room in which it would be safe to leave a disabled person unattended or improved lighting to ensure better visibility.
- Making access easier to the living room.
- Providing or improving access to the bedroom, and kitchen toilet, washbasin and bath (and/or shower) facilities; for example, by installing a stair lift or providing a downstairs bathroom.
- Improving or providing a heating system in the home which is suitable to the needs of the disabled person.
- Adapting heating or lighting controls to make them easier to use.

- Improving access and movement around the home to enable the disabled person to care for another person who lives in the property, such as a spouse, child or another person for whom the disabled person cares.
- Facilitate access to and from a garden by a disabled occupant or make access to a garden safe for a disabled occupant.

5.1.2 DFGs are monitored at TBC by way of a local performance tracker. Information regularly provided includes numbers of grants and total budget allocated.

5.1.3 A person can apply for a DFG for themselves or someone living in the property if they have a disability. Under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989, someone is disabled if:

- Their sight, hearing or speech is substantially impaired.
- They have a mental disorder or impairment of any kind.
- They are physically substantially disabled by illness, injury impairment present since birth, or otherwise.
- They are registered disabled (or could be registered) with the social services department.

5.1.4 Before issuing a DFG we must know that the works are necessary and appropriate to meet the needs of the disabled person and are reasonable and practicable depending on the age and condition of the property. In reaching a decision the authority will consider whether the proposed adaptations or improvements:

- Are needed to provide for a care plan to be implemented which will enable the disabled occupant to remain living in their existing home as independently as possible.
- Would meet, as far as possible, the assessed needs of the disabled person taking into account both their medical and physical needs.
- Distinguish between what is desirable and possible legitimate aspirations of the disabled person, and what is actually needed and for which grant support is fully justified.

5.1.5 We must consult social services authorities in coming to a view on whether the proposed works are ‘necessary and appropriate’ – in addition we must decide whether those works are ‘reasonable and practicable.’ We do this by working with OTs, most of which now work on the ground floor of the Tewkesbury Borough Public Services Centre.

5.1.6 A local authority must give a DFG if the applicant meets the conditions of getting one.

5.2 Finance

5.2.1 The financial test of applicants largely mirrors the system of calculating entitlement to housing benefit. The amount paid is usually based on a financial assessment (a means test) of a person's average weekly income in relation to their outgoings. Even if they have been assessed as in need of an adaptation the grant will be affected if their income and

savings exceeds the limit of the test of resources. They may receive a full grant or may be required to make a contribution towards the cost of the works. The maximum grant limit in England is £30,000. Certain payments to the most seriously disabled service personnel are disregarded for the purposes of assessing eligibility. The means test does not apply where an application for grant is made by the parent or guardian of a disabled child or young person (under 19 years).

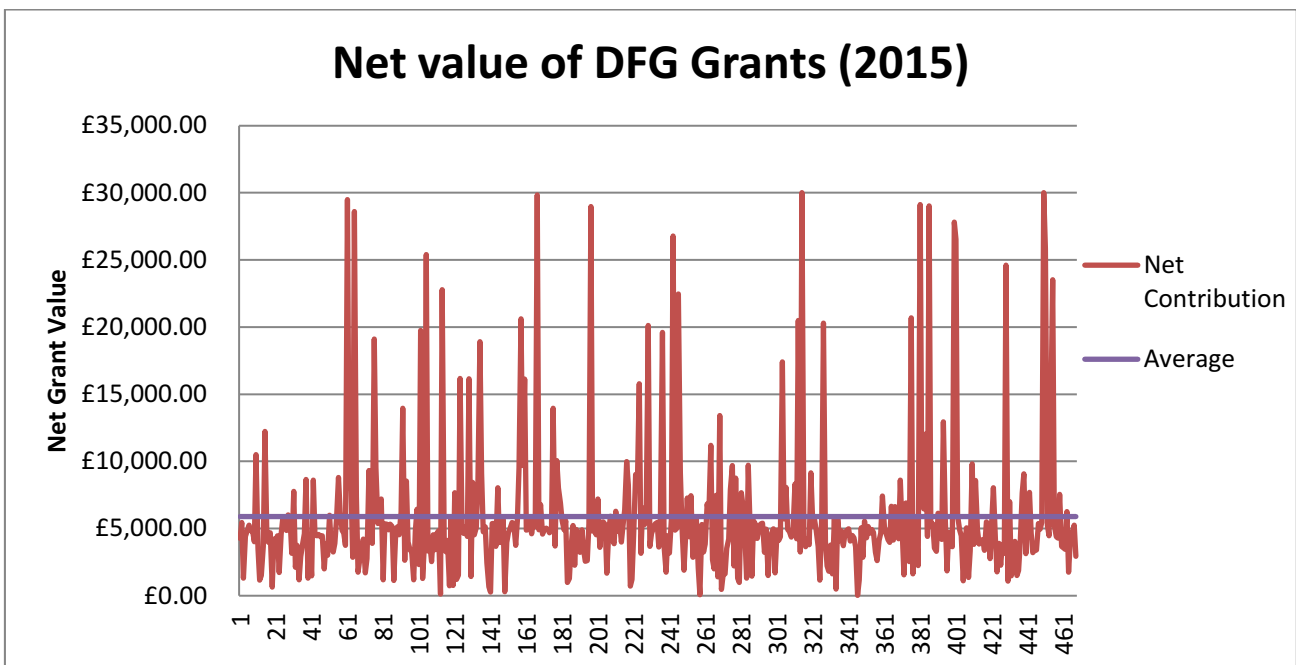
5.2.2 The last major change to grant regulations by government was in 2007. At this time the means test in respect of grants for children was scrapped and subsequently the maximum grant amount was raised from £25,000 to £30,000.

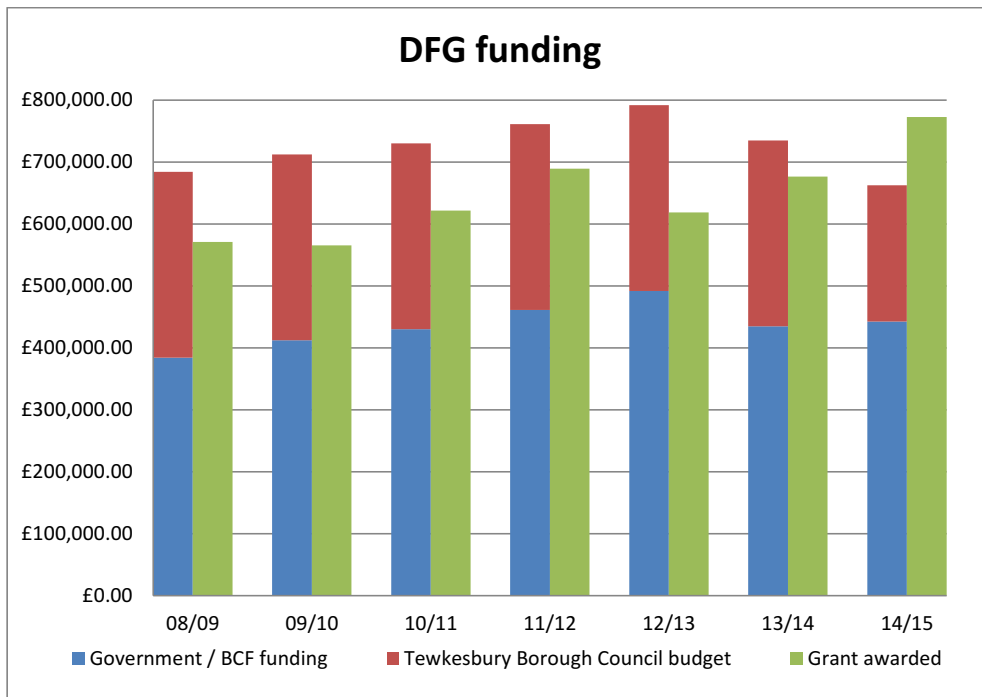
5.2.3 In 2012/13, overall expenditure on DFGs by TBC was £618,521, in 2013/14, it was £676,577 and in 2014/15 it was £772,409.

5.2.4 Although central government funding has gradually risen over the past 15 years it has only kept pace with inflation. Consequently the central government subsidy only accounts for a proportion of the resources LAs put into DFGs. TBCs medium term financial plan offers £220,000 of capital funding over the next five years to meet the local demand (most authorities do the same; all in Gloucestershire do so) but as more capital projects are approved we may have to look at other ways of financing DFGs or find ways of reducing our contribution. The graph on page six shows DFG historical capital allocation over and above the government / Better Care Fund (BCF) (see 5.2.6) allocation compared with the total grant awarded.

“A local authority must give a DFG if the
applicant meets the conditions
of getting one”

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Referrals	157	129	152	162	150
Approvals	115	110	101	117	135
Completed	111	109	108	118	129
Grants completed £1,000 - £5,000	55	69	56	65	78
Grants completed £5,000 - £10,000	44	30	40	42	39
Grants completed over £10,000	12	10	12	11	12
Spend Total	£621,627	£689,192	£618,521	£676,577	£772,409





5.2.5 Housing association (HA) tenants are entitled to apply for a DFG. All do, including SVHS tenants. The cost of the adaptation falls to the local authority and not the HA. Spend on housing association properties averages around 40% per year. Figures in the past two years for other Gloucestershire authorities without their own stock or an ALMO range from 39% to 64% of the budget spent on HA properties.

5.2.6 As part of the June 2013 Spending Review the government announced the creation of a pooled fund to enable the NHS and local authorities to jointly commission health and social care services. The 2015-16 allocations to the Better Care Fund for Gloucestershire have been confirmed by the Gloucestershire Health and Wellbeing Board as follows: Total: £39.948m comprising £35.989m from the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to the Better Care Fund; £1.409m Social Care Capital

Grant; and £2.550m DFG. This year the funding allocation to all districts for DFGs has been ring-fenced at the capital levels from 2014/15, however, this ring-fence ceases next financial year, i.e. the administrators of the fund are not obliged to specifically provide funding for DFGs. Nevertheless the direction of travel is a move to more planned care and to avoid unplanned admissions to hospitals and care homes where care can be provided more effectively in people’s homes or the community.

5.2.7 It is ultimately the health service rather than local authorities that benefit financially from the preventative measures of DFGs and funding mechanisms need to reflect this reality. A number of studies have recognised that there is a financial benefit to the government as a whole in providing DFGs that enable applicants to remain in their own homes. When weighed

up against the cost of a place in a residential home, the cost of a DFG which allows an applicant to remain in their own home makes financial sense.

making any contributions over and above that amount if the situation remains unchanged.

5.2.8 The CCG have no intention of recommending a reduction of the ring fenced funding identified for DFGs in the Better Care Fund moving forward. However, they have expressed a firm view that HAs should be funding adaptations in their own stock through revenue contributions and would not therefore be

5.2.9 There is already pressure on the DFG budget across the whole of the country and this will only increase as people are living longer and the percentage of the older population increases.

5.3 Staffing by Tewkesbury Borough Council

Officer	Description of work	Approx. weekly hours spent on DFGs
Environmental Health Manager	Operational Management Grant approvals Payments Authorise completion	2
Technical Housing Officer	Means test Property surveys Liaising with contractors Liaising with OTs “Snagging” visits Advice and Information Completion visits	30
Administrative Officer	Advice and information Correspondence Arrange for payments	15

5.4 Demographics

5.4.1 In Gloucestershire, the number of people aged 75 and over (the ages at which home adaptations and other service support is most likely to be required) is projected to increase each year by an average of 1,500 between 2010 - 2020 and by 2,300 each year between 2020 and 2035.

5.4.2 According to 2012 population projections, numbers aged over 65 in Tewkesbury borough will rise from 20,000 in 2016 to 30,000 in 2037.

5.5 The application process

5.5.1 The group considered the process below which describes the method whereby a grant applicant's home is adapted. It describes a 'usual' process which most grants follow, however it is recognised that many projects could be subject to additional steps due to their unusual nature. These tend to be bespoke and therefore impossible to describe for every situation in this report. Stairlifts are an example of a type of adaptation which tends to involve less of the process due to OTs obtaining quotations for work.

5.5.2 The initial approach to social services can be either from the person themselves or a referral from elsewhere such as a GP. An OT will arrange to visit the applicant to assess their needs and will produce a report with recommendations for the specific work that needs to be carried out.

5.5.3 The OT will refer the case to TBC on a (countywide agreed) referral form. This will provide address and personal details.

5.5.4 The applicant will be visited by an officer who will help complete the application form and will collect information to help complete the means test and identify both the applicant and the owner of the property to be adapted. The officer will also identify if and how the wishes of the OT can be realised in the applicant's home.

5.5.5 The assumption is made that the applicant will receive a DFG. Officers make enquiries as to if the applicant would like to move, but it was felt that this happens too late in the process and few options are offered to the applicant. It was recognised that moving may not be the answer for everyone as they may be in the most suitable accommodation for them. Also the applicant may not want to move and there is no way to either force someone to move or to threaten not to pay a grant if they are eligible.

5.5.6 The officer will carry out the means test and inform the applicant if they have any contribution to make. The officer will complete a schedule of works and ask the client or their agent to see two quotations for the work required.

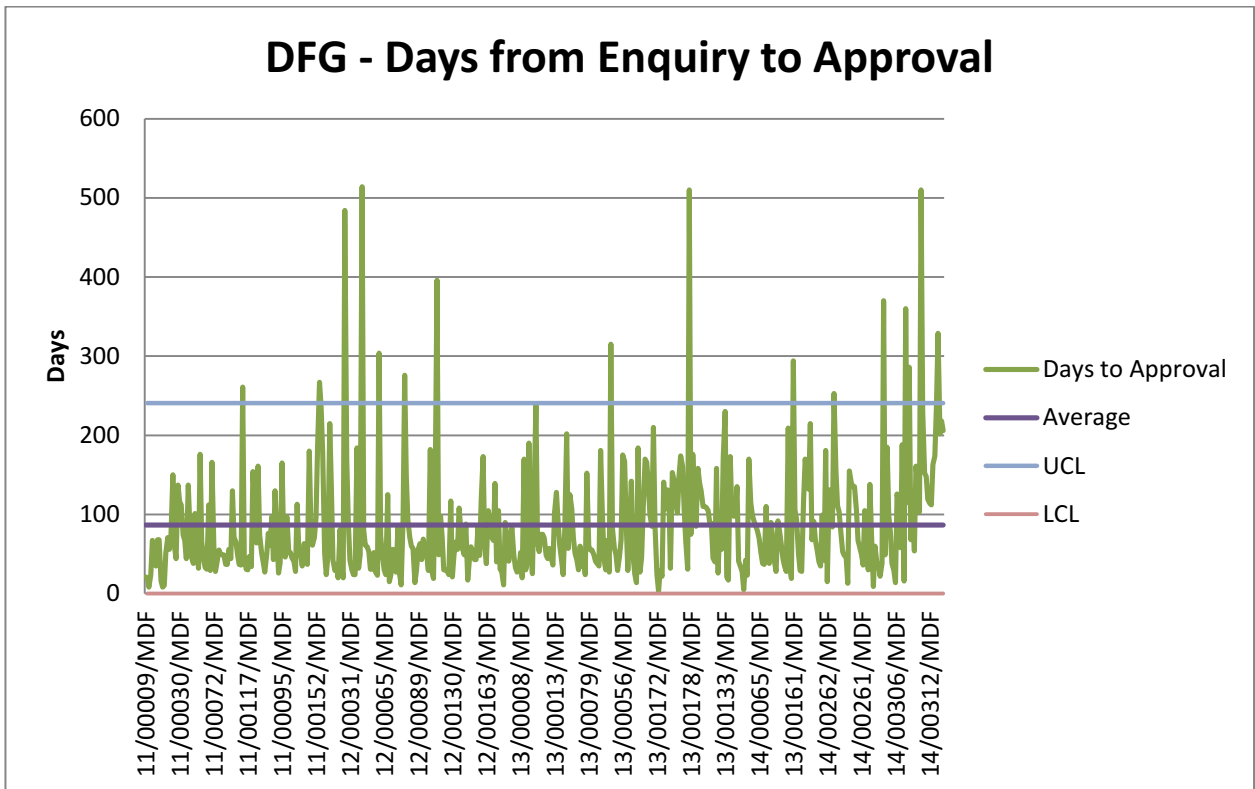
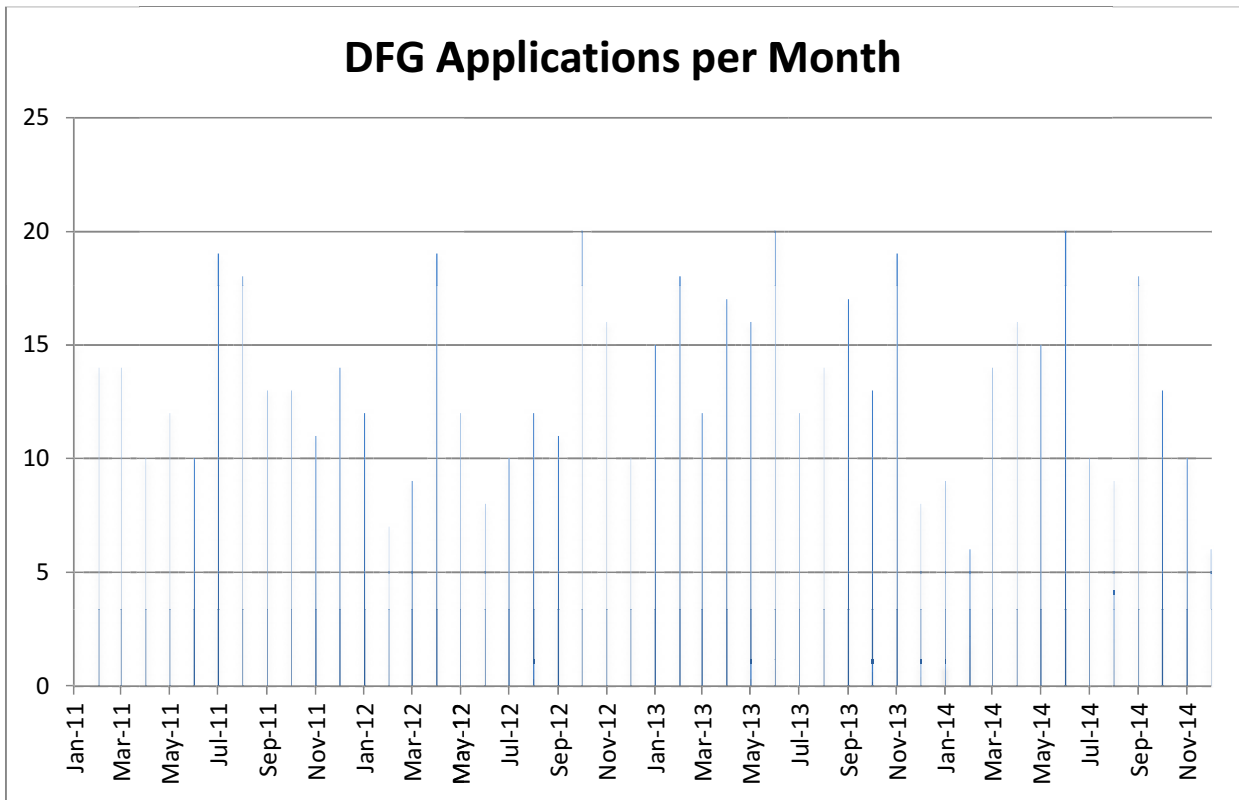
5.5.7 The OT is invited to pass opinion as to if the schedule will meet the needs of the applicant.

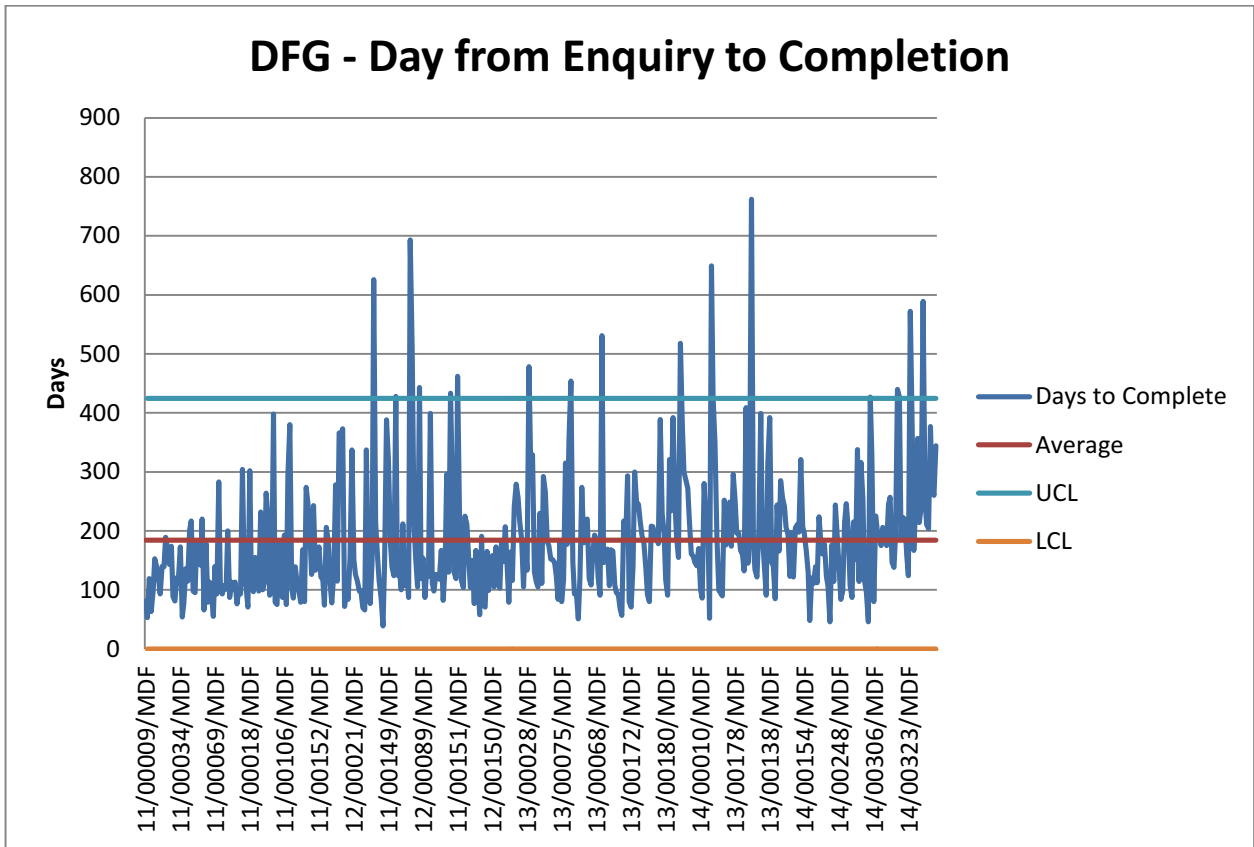
- 5.5.8** Once valid quotations are received, the grant is approved.
- 5.5.9** The applicant or their agent arranges for the work to be carried out.
- 5.5.10** For larger jobs, builders may ask for interim payments which are honoured if the work is seen to be satisfactorily complete. Progress checks may also be made on all jobs.
- 5.5.11** Once complete, the work is checked that it meets the requirements of the schedule. The OT is also invited to comment (sometimes a joint final visit is made to make sure the works meet the needs of the applicant although this is not always necessary).
- 5.5.12** Systems have been built up over time which means that all parties are kept informed, however this means that there is a lot of paperwork, some of which, although desirable isn't always necessary (e.g. there is no statutory requirement to carry it out). Also there has been no review carried out to see if the information meets the needs of the applicant.
- 5.5.13** Where the applicant is elderly, the time taken for the whole process to be completed has meant that they have little time to benefit from the adaptation before their requirements change. This may result in them applying again or reopening an existing grant application.

- 5.5.14** The group felt that currently there was a lot of duplication of work and effort, for instance completing forms on site and re-entering information on the back office computer database when back in the office.
- 5.5.15** The Gloucestershire Safe at Home HIA service is available for applicants to use, to help with the work involved in adapting their home. They tend to be used by the most vulnerable people who are unable to find contractors themselves.

5.6 Statistics

- 5.6.1** For applications approved between 1/4/2011 and 31/12/2014: Numbers of passported applications (i.e. applicant in receipt of a qualifying benefit):
- 312 applications approved
 - 244 passported
 - 78.2%
- 5.6.2** For applications approved between 1/4/2011 and 31/12/2014: Applications approved where the applicant has a financial contribution to pay:
- 312 applications approved
 - 38 with a contribution to make
 - 12.2%
 - 30 with no contribution to make
 - 9.6%



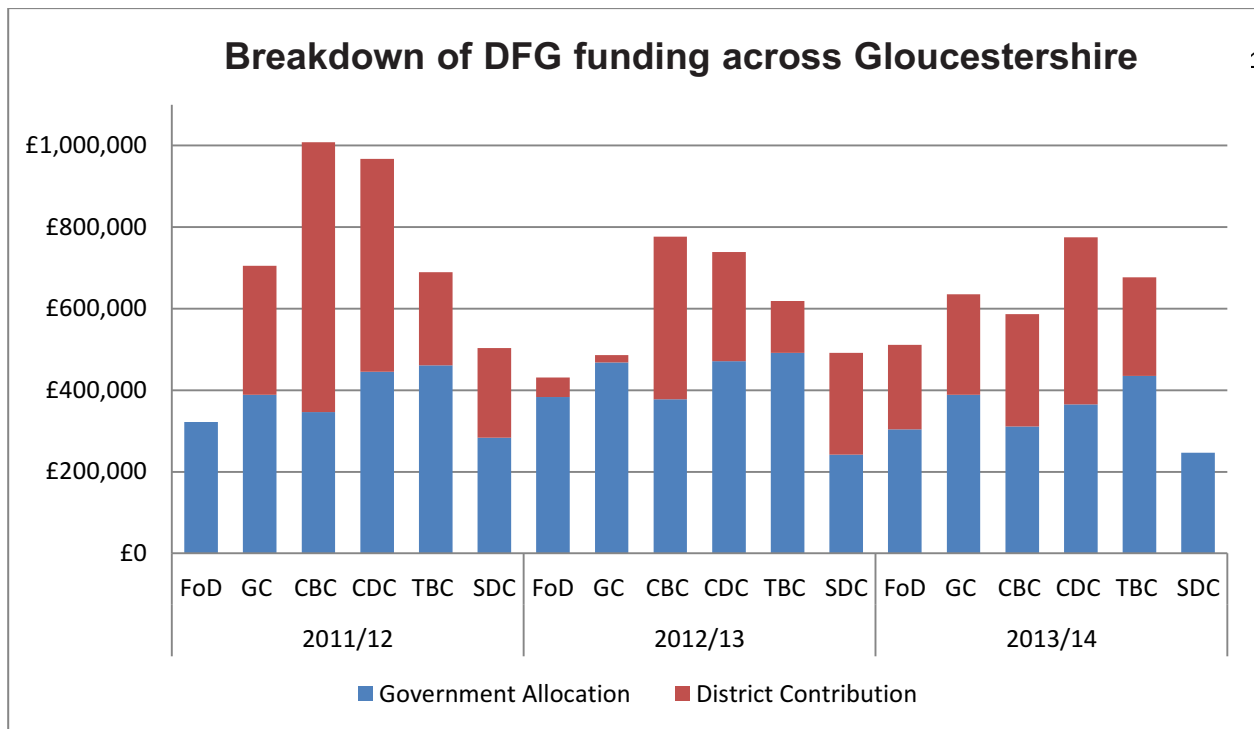


5.7 Benchmarking

5.7.1 The following tables provide information for comparison on the delivery of DFGs in all Gloucestershire districts.

		Cheltenham Borough Council	Cotswold District Council	Forest of Dean District Council	Gloucester City Council	Stroud District Council	Tewkesbury Borough Council
2013/14	Total DFG budget spend	£586,665	£ 775,250	#####	£635,429	£167,379	£676,577
	Total Net DFG budget spent on HA	£85,273	£494,998	£248,311	£56,413	£3,719	*
	% DFG budget spent on HA	15%	64%	49%	9%	2%	*
	Additional ALMO or Council HRA spend on adaptations	£439,587			£368,380	£300,261	
2012/13	Total DFG budget Spend	£490,516	£738,913	£431,552	£485,835	£276,328	£618,521
	Total Net DFG budget spent on HA	£36,399	£426,666	£166,901	£136,222	£3,124	£237,948
	% DFG budget spent on HA	7%	58%	39%	28%	1%	38%
	Additional ALMO or Council HRA spend on adaptations	£286,203			£393,826	£215,101	
2011/12	Total DFG budget Spend	£689,336	£967,148	£322,213	£704,736	£307,571	£689,192
	Total Net DFG budget spent on HA	£111,190	£487,009	£126,262	£121,232	£18,407	£334,619
	% DFG budget spent on HA	16%	50%	39%	17%	6%	49%
	Additional ALMO or Council HRA spend on adaptations	£318,741			£338,909	£195,569	

“Close co-operation between all partners will produce **consistency of service** and improved communication”



6. Conclusions

6.1 The Task Group reflected on the information and evidence they had considered throughout the review and arrived at the following conclusions:

6.2 TBC officers work closely with OTs and other districts in Gloucestershire to offer as joined-up a service as possible and as such many joint processes and procedures have been developed over time. It was noted by the group that one other district in Gloucestershire has shown interest in the work of the group and officers.

6.3 Long delivery times from enquiry to delivery are not desirable and we should explore ways to address them.

6.4 The cost of providing each type of adaptation should be reduced where possible.

6.5 Some of the paperwork can be complicated and unnecessary; this should be simplified wherever possible.

6.6 Close co-operation between all partners will produce consistency of service and improved communication.

6.7 Housing options for potential applicants should always be explored, including if it is better for the applicant (and less of an impact on the budget) for them to move into suitably adapted (or more easily adapted) accommodation if that is what they want. This would include offering a grant both to move and to adapt the accommodation they are moving to if this would cost less than adapting the existing property.

- 6.8** Officers are reliant on technology to produce letters, to calculate the financial means test and to track progress. In the past 12 months paperwork has been minimised by relying on electronic methods of communicating and scanning in paper documents. However there has been a reluctance to completely abandon paper. Therefore further use of technology to speed up the process and assist applicants should be explored.
- 6.9** The delivery of DFGs involves a number of agencies and council departments working closely together for the best outcome. The work carried out as part of this review can therefore be used as a way to inform similar processes that may require agencies to work together on health and wellbeing issues. Therefore this review can be used as a learning tool for when health and wellbeing strategies, policies and processes need reviewing.
- 6.10** In addition, the successful delivery of the action plan must involve a (continued) close working partnership between officers at TBC, GCC and SVHS as well as other agencies in order to deliver the best possible outcomes for applicants. This may also include fostering new operational relationships when this improves the service.

Disabled Facilities Grant Working Group Action Plan January 2016			
Action Number	Recommendation details	Delivery date	Delivered by
1	Those enquiring who may be eligible for DFG, to be supported to see if a possible move to more suitable accommodation would be a better outcome for them, and to provide suitable assistance and support to help make this happen, should the person so wish.	March 2016	EHM / SHM / SVHS / OT
2	Look at methods of procuring work, such as (but not limited to) schedules of rates and preferred contractors, as ways that could reduce the time taken for a contractor to be on site.	May 2016	EHM / HTO
3	Review all existing paperwork connected with the DFG process at TBC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Eliminate unnecessary paperwork b. Review the content of the DFG application form and the way it is completed c. Combine documents into one where this is possible d. Use electronic methods of communication wherever possible e. Work with stakeholders to identify any communication gaps where additional advice or information could be given. 	May 2016	EHM / HTO
4	Explore the further use of technology (by officers and applicants) to speed up the process and assist applicants.	July 2016	EHM
5	Use the learning gained from this review to inform local health and wellbeing plans, strategies and processes.		
6	Review the effect of the actions in 1 to 5 above on the costs of delivering the service and subsequently reduce the TBC capital contribution due to depleting capital resources	August 2016	EHM/FM

