

Maidstone Borough Council

Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 24 November 2009

Disabled Facilities Grants Review –The Role of In Touch

Report of: Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At the meeting of the Regeneration and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 30 June 2009, Members agreed to carry out a review of disabled facilities grants. The relevant extract from the minutes of the meeting is as follows:

“The Committee agreed that clearance of contaminated land would be its major review of this year. It was noted that there were a number of sensitive issues with regard to this matter, and the Legal Team had been asked for advice on this. A smaller review would also be carried out with regard to disabled facilities grants.”

- 1.2 It was agreed, in consultation with the Chairman, to delay the Committee’s in-depth review of contaminated land to November 2009 as changes to the contaminated land strategy were being made and it was agreed prudent to await the outcome of this.
- 1.3 At its meeting on 25 August 2009, the Committee interviewed the Private Sector Housing Manager, Stuart White with regard to its review of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The Committee agreed that the review should focus on: the distribution of DFGs to Registered Social Landlords, home owners and private sector tenants; what happened to adaptations funded by DFGs after installation; the impact of Choice Based Lettings; and whether all aids and adaptations were appropriate and necessary.
- 1.4 The Committee interviewed the Group Director of Operations, Ms Jillie Smithies, and the Property Services Manager, Ms Eileen Parrott, from Maidstone Housing Trust (MHT) and Councillor Beerling, a Council nominee on Maidstone Housing Trust’s Board of Directors, at its meeting on 29 September 2009.
- 1.5 At its meeting on 27 October 2009, Members interviewed the Head of Services for the Maidstone and Malling Locality, Ms Sue Stower, and the Senior Practitioner, Mr Peter Buckley, from Kent County Council’s Adult Social Services with regard to the role of Occupational Therapists in DFGs.
- 1.6 In the scoping document for the review of DFGs, the Committee agreed that it would be useful to interview a representative from In Touch, Mid and West Kent Home Improvement Agency. The Project Manager, David Eaton, and a Caseworker, Tracy Topley, from In Touch will therefore be in attendance at the meeting to be interviewed by the Committee.
- 1.7 The scoping document for this review is attached at [Appendix A](#).

2. In Touch

2.1 In Touch Mid and West Kent Home Improvement Agency is a care, support and supported housing charity and is part of the Hyde Group, the UK's largest housing association. It was initially set up to carry out, improve and grow Hyde Group's work with people who needed care or support to live independently, and operates in the Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone Borough Council areas.

2.2 In Touch assists elderly residents (aged 60 or over) or those residents (regardless of their age) who are considering adaptations, with Disabled Facilities Grant. The service is available to private home owners, tenants and private landlords and is usually free.

2.3 The Home Improvement Agency can offer:

- Practical advice and support, including liaison with external agencies if necessary;
- Technical expertise in preparing a detailed specification and drawings if appropriate;
- Assistance in completing grant applications and investigating and securing alternative funding; and
- Assistance in finding reliable contractors, supervising the work and authorising payments.

The agency can also offer help in carrying out minor repairs or major adaptations, and give advice concerning energy efficiency and home security.

2.4 Upon instruction, a caseworker and a surveyor will visit the customer's home to talk about possible repairs and adaptations and give advice on the work needed. They will also assess the customer's personal needs and risks, their home and their finances, and if necessary find an organisation to help with other problems. All advice is provided free of charge.

2.5 Once a customer decides to go ahead with works using In Touch, In Touch will: list any work that needs to be done and get estimates; help the customer find and apply for funding; recommend and contact builders, instruct them and arrange payment; and check the work while it is being done and after it is finished.

2.6 Access to the Home Improvement Agency services are entirely optional. Those considering works of repair, improvement or adaptation to their homes may also consider the appointment of an independent building surveyor or architect to assist them in preparing a suitable scheme and in supervising works.

2.7 The Home Improvement Agency also operates a Handyperson service and is able to carry out minor repairs and improvements such as fitting smoke detectors, easing doors and windows and minor plumbing repairs.

3. Disabled Facilities Grants

- 3.1 Disabled Facilities Grants are a mandatory entitlement administered by local housing authorities to help fund the provision of adaptations to enable disabled people to live as comfortably and independently as possible in their homes. A grant is paid when the council considers that changes are necessary to meet disabled persons' needs, and that the work is reasonable and practical.
- 3.2 A grant can be used for adaptations to give better freedom of movement into and around the home and/or to provide essential facilities within it. Acceptable types of work for disabled people include:
- Widening doors and installing ramps;
 - Providing or improving access to rooms and facilities - for example, by installing a stair lift or providing a downstairs bathroom;
 - Improving or providing a heating system;
 - Adapting heating or lighting controls to make them easier to use; and
 - Improving access to and movement around the home to enable disabled people to care for another person who lives in the property, such as a child.

An occupational therapist looks at the claimant's circumstances and will recommend the type of adaptation(s) needed.

- 3.3 The work must be considered "reasonable and practicable" bearing in mind the layout and condition of the property, and is assessed by an officer of Maidstone Borough Council. Maidstone Borough Council must also be satisfied that the works required are "necessary and appropriate" to meet the needs of the disabled occupant and to establish this will consult with the Social Services Department of Kent County Council through their Occupational Therapy Bureau.
- 3.4 The amount of grant paid is usually based on a financial assessment - a 'means test' - of the applicant's average weekly income in relation to their outgoings. However, there is no means testing for families with disabled children under 19. Depending on the outcome of this assessment the amount of financial assistance offered can vary from 0 to 100 per cent of the cost.
- 3.5 The maximum amount of grant that an English council is required to pay is £30,000 per application less any assessed contribution from the claimant. If the cost of the eligible works is more, the council can use discretionary powers to increase the amount.
- 3.6 The following Disabled Facilities Grant Allocations have been received by Maidstone Borough Council from Communities and Local Government since 2006:

2006/07	£210,000
2007/08	£237,000
2008/09	£270,000
2009/10	£405,000

3.7 Kent County Council also has separate funding to help vulnerable people to have 'a better quality of life by providing housing related support services'. This is provided through Kent County Council's Supporting People programme. The programme helps pay for the services that allow people to live independently in the community.

4. Recommendation

4.1 David Eaton, the Project Manager, and, Tracy Topley, a Caseworker from In Touch, will be in attendance at the Committee's meeting on the 24 November 2009 to discuss: their views on DFGs; In-Touch's role and involvement with DFGs; their customer base; whether all adaptations are necessary; and what could be done to improve the process.

4.2 Members are recommended to consider the statements of Mr Eaton and Ms Topley and ask questions with regard to the Disabled Facilities Grants Review as they feel appropriate. Areas of questioning could include, but are not limited to:

- Best Practice;
- The role of Home Improvement Agencies in the provision of Disabled Facility Grants;
- Waiting times to receive assistance for Disabled Facilities Grants;
- Who the service is for;
- The relationship between In Touch, Maidstone Borough Council and Landlords in providing Disabled Facilities Grants;
- Other assistance offered to residents by In Touch;
- What improvements could be made to the Disabled Facilities Grants process to assist residents; and
- How residents find out about the provision of Disabled Facilities Grants.