

**MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MINUTES OF THE REGENERATION AND SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE  
MEETING HELD ON TUESDAY 29 SEPTEMBER 2009**

**PRESENT:** Councillor Sherreard (Chairman)  
Councillors FitzGerald, Nelson-Gracie, Paine, Ross,  
Moriarty and Vizzard

**APOLOGIES:** Apologies for absence were received from Councillor  
Thick and Beerling.

**48. The Committee to consider whether all items on the agenda should be web-cast.**

The Committee agreed to not web-cast Agenda Item 8, Disabled Facilities Grants, 'Interview with Maidstone Housing Trust', following a request from a witness. Due to a technical difficulty, the Committee agreed to only web-cast Agenda Items 9, 'Disabled Facilities Grants, Interview with Councillor Beerling' and 10 'Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions'.

**Resolved:** That Agenda Items 9 and 10 be web-cast.

**49. Apologies.**

Apologies were received from Councillor Thick. It was noted that Councillor Beerling had sent his apologies for the first part of the meeting as he had a prejudicial interest in Agenda Item 8, Disabled Facilities Grants, and he would only be in attendance for Agenda Item 9 as a witness for the Disabled Facilities Grants review.

**50. Notification of Substitute Members.**

It was noted that Councillor Moriarty was substituting for Councillor Beerling.

**51. Notification of Visiting Members.**

There were no visiting Members.

**52. Disclosures by Members and Officers:**

There were no disclosures.

**53. To consider whether any items should be taken in private because of the possible disclosure of exempt information.**

**Resolved:** That all items on the agenda be taken in public as proposed.

#### **54. Minutes of the Meeting Held on 25 August 2009.**

**Resolved:** That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 August 2009 be agreed as a correct record and duly signed by the Chairman.

#### **55. Disabled Facilities Grants: Maidstone Housing Trust: Interview with Maidstone Housing Trust.**

The Chairman welcomed the Group Director of Operations, Ms Jillie Smithies, and the Property Services Manager, Ms Eileen Parrott, from Maidstone Housing Trust (MHT) to the meeting. The Committee received a presentation on Housing Adaptations, attached at Appendix A. This highlighted MHT's approach to housing adaptations, current issues, best practice, future plans, wider MHT initiatives, issues within the social housing sector and areas requiring further exploration.

##### Maidstone Housing Trust's Approach

It was agreed as part of the stock transfer that MHT would continue to deliver adaptations to its housing stock. This included the management of adaptations using its own technical staff, even if it had been funded through Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) or Communities and Local Government.

MHT's level of contribution for adaptations had been agreed as part of the transfer; it had been set at £126,000 per annum, with increments in accordance with the RPI (Retail Price Index) plus one per cent for the first five years and RPI thereafter. MBC had agreed to match this level of funding.

In 2008 all major adaptations were processed through the Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) process. 2008/09 had seen a high level of adaptation to clear the backlog of applications; MHT delivered 219 minor adaptations amounting to £54,000 and 171 major adaptations amounting to £659,000. £415,000 of this had been funded through DFGs and the rest by MHT. If a bathroom or kitchen was being replaced as part of the MHT capital works programme, properties requiring adaptations were currently funded through this rather than through DFGs.

Bolt-on adaptations such as grab rails took approximately 5 days to process from receipt of approval for works. Minor adaptations requiring Occupational Therapist recommendations took an average of 28 days to process. Major adaptations carried out by MHT took approximately 9 months on average, which compared favourably with other providers/local authorities where they can often take up to 2 years. The oldest application currently awaiting work dated from February 2009. Levels of future demand were difficult to determine, however it was anticipated that MBC's Housing Needs Survey would help to predict them.

MHT's adaptations service was customer driven. MHT policy recognised this and also the need to achieve value for money. All viable alternative solutions were considered with the customer to fulfil their needs and to

provide value for money, particularly when significant adaptations were required. MHT was currently exploring how to make the adaptations process more transparent. It was therefore preparing guidance which would depict which adaptations were inappropriate in certain property types.

In 2007, the Audit Commission had found that MHT's performance was good. A recent internal audit had found examples of good practice and had highlighted areas for improvement.

### Current Issues

MHT had worked hard to develop its relationships with KCC's Occupational Therapy Department to ensure that the best recommendations for customers were achieved. This included being able to ask the Occupational Therapist (OT) whether another property was a better solution to meet the customer's needs rather than just making recommendations on the customer's existing property. OTs were responsible for making recommendations that met current and future needs over a five year period; this ensured the customer was able to continue living in their property for as long as possible without further requirements for adaptations.

Property Advisors and Support Co-ordinators at MHT were able to use their expertise of supporting people who needed help through the adaptations process. A pilot project with InTouch was currently being undertaken whereby InTouch rather than MHT was supporting 20 residents through the DFG process, including help with completing application forms. It was anticipated that InTouch would support people across the county and that this would provide a consistent level of support to Kent's residents, whilst maximising opportunities for residents. It was also anticipated that this would speed up the application process as consistency in the input of paperwork would be achieved.

MHT had regular meetings with MBC to review any issues, current demand, performance and prioritisation. Applications were dealt with in date order, but dialogue with the Council ensured urgent cases were dealt with sooner.

There had been an issue with the variance of estimated costs and final costs. This had been solved by re-tendering the cost of bathing items, which had accounted for over 90% of cases. Demand for adaptations varied, therefore two contractors were used to meet demand.

### Best Practice

The following were determined as good practice:

- Clarity on the definition of the type of major/minor adaptations
- Clear processes with target timescales;
- Arrangements for ongoing maintenance in place;
- OT advice on all majors and some minors adaptations;
- Prioritisation;
- Support for residents on DFG applications;

- Joint MBC/MHT post inspection and satisfaction testing of adaptations;
- Regular liaison between OT/MBC/MHT;
- Adaptations as part of Planned Investment.

MHT was meeting many of these standards. Further work was required on key performance indicators and ensuring these were fit for purpose and measurable. Indicators currently measured included: end to end time scales; customer satisfaction; and views of service. Future indicators will aim to include more qualitative measurements such as the impact on resident's quality of life.

MHT staff will be trained as trusted assessors for minor adaptation requirements to speed up the process and allow OTs to concentrate on more complex cases.

### Future

MHT was moving towards a needs-led service in adaptations for customers. It had also placed more importance in value for money of adaptations. Initiatives such as recycling aids had consequently been pursued. MHT tried to re-let vacant adapted properties to customers with similar needs to ensure both a better service for customers and continued value for money. If this was not possible, the adaptation was removed. In response to a question, Ms Smithies confirmed that the cost of significant adaptations and leaving a vacant property empty was weighed up. MHT did try to recycle removed aids as much as possible, however it was difficult and often more expensive than providing new aids. In response to a question regarding why items were removed from properties, Ms Smithies advised the Committee that the majority of adaptations were to meet bathing needs; this had meant removal of baths in many older properties which were later re-instated to meet the needs of families, irrespective of the quality of the adaptation. A Councillor queried whether a significant amount of aids were removed from properties and Ms Smithies agreed to supply estimated numbers of disabled enhancements removed from MHT properties over a 6 month period. Members also queried whether MHT was aware of many occasions of adaptations being removed by residents when they became surplus to requirements and were advised that MHT was not aware of any incidences of this, and tenants were required to seek advice or permission to make changes.

The importance of ensuring that the future supply of accessible homes was sufficient, built to Lifetime Home standards and available for housing association tenants was also highlighted to the Committee. Ms Smithies advised that it was more cost effective to build a home to the standard rather than to retro-fit it to the standard. The Committee requested further information about Lifetime Home standards.

### Wider Initiatives

A Kent Housing Group sub-group was reviewing aids and adaptations in the County. MHT attended this group and felt it was a useful forum for contributing and learning from peers. MHT also considered Audit

Commission inspection reports to learn from initiatives across the country. The Committee agreed that these reports could also be used as background research to its review.

### Sector Issues

Government guidance on future approaches to adaptations was expected to bring standardisation across the sector and remove inconsistencies in levels of investment and thresholds of the minimum spend amounts for a DFG application. Some providers had thresholds of £1000 for major works in comparison to others with £2500, though the reasons for this difference varied.

Ms Smithies informed Members that DFGs could only be used on occupied properties. Flexibility in using a DFG to adapt a vacant property was not available, even if this was the cheaper and preferred option. Ms Smithies felt that this flexibility should be allowed if it was the best option to meet the customer's needs but currently seeks to use the Trust budget provision imaginatively to facilitate this type of solution.

Kent Home choice was looking at increasing its flexibility from an adaptation perspective to meet customer needs. It could enable residents to move into already adapted properties across the county. Conversely, as more choice was offered to the customer, the customer may elect to move to an alternative property and request DFGs to make the property suitable.

### Areas to Explore

Areas of work that MHT needed to explore further included identifying where to invest money in the rolling programme of works being undertaken to improve their existing housing stock beyond the current Decent Home Standard. This could include elements to move homes towards the Lifetimes Homes standard. Further work was also required to identify the funding for replacement adaptations and in publicising DFGs to residents.

In response to a question, Ms Smithies advised she was unsure what the total number of adapted properties in MHT's stock was; the way the data had been initially stored had made it difficult to manipulate this information for each property. MHT was planning to undertake a condition survey of all its stock and this would identify any adaptations made to properties.

42% of DFGs in Maidstone were distributed to MHT tenants. This was a lower percentage than in other districts, with some distributing 60-70% of their DFGs to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). Ms Smithies explained that 42% was not a surprising proportion as RSLs had a higher percentage of vulnerable residents and these were the people more likely to need an adaptation. Members noted that DFGs were means tested and the ability to influence the proportion of DFGs to RSLs was therefore questionable. The Committee requested further information on the distribution of DFGs in other districts.

The Chairman thanked Ms Smithies and Ms Parrott for their input into the Committee's review.

**Resolved:** That

- a) The Audit Commission's reports with regard to Disabled Facilities Grants be considered as part of the Disabled Facilities Grants Review;
- b) Ms Smithies supply the Committee with the estimated number of Disabled Facility Grant enabled adaptations removed from Maidstone Housing Trust properties over the last 6 months;
- c) The distribution of Disabled Facilities Grants to Registered Social Landlord tenants in other districts be circulated to the Committee; and
- d) Information regarding Lifetime Home Standards be circulated to the Committee.

#### **56. Disabled Facilities Grants: Interview with Councillor Beerling.**

(Councillor Beerling enters the meeting)

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Beerling to the meeting and asked him to talk about his experiences of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). Councillor Beerling informed the Committee that he felt that when he was assessed by an Occupational Therapist, he was offered a wide range of aids and adaptations that he did not feel he necessarily needed. He queried whether an alternative approach was available in determining a customer's needs. Members agreed it was difficult to quantify a need for improved quality of life and agreed to consider the whole process with regard to DFGs, including whether all adaptations offered were actually required.

Councillor Beerling advised the Committee that he felt it would be useful to consider the Council's approach to DFGs, whether it was needs-based, whether the level of influence by social services was appropriate and whether value for money was being achieved. He also felt that the Committee should investigate the feasibility of recycling adaptations given the cost of removing, storing and re-installing items. He felt that the relationship between Maidstone Borough Council and Registered Social Landlords could be improved and that this too could be explored as part of the review.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Beerling for sharing his experiences of DFGs with the Committee.

(Councillor Beerling leaves the meeting)

The Committee discussed the progress of its review and agreed that Maidstone Housing Trust should be asked to provide the stock condition data that was available with regard to DFGs. It also felt that it would be particularly useful to interview an Occupational Therapist with regard to adaptation needs and a representative from the Home Choice Project

Board with regard to the implications of Choice Based Lettings on Disabled Facilities Grants. Members agreed that the review explore:

- Whether all adaptations were actually required;
- The issue of adapted housing as part of new development requirements; and
- The quality of adaptations and whether they were aesthetically pleasing to prevent future residents requesting removal of the adaptations.

**Resolved:** That

- a) The Committee explore the following as part of its Disabled Facilities Grants review:
  - i. The need of all adaptations made;
  - ii. Adapted housing as part of new development requirements; and
  - iii. The quality of adaptations installed.
- b) An Occupational Therapist be interviewed as part of the review;
- c) A representative from the Home Choice Project Board be interviewed with regard to the implications of Choice Based Lettings on Disabled Facilities Grants; and
- d) Maidstone Housing Trust be asked to provide its stock condition data that was available with regard to Disabled Facilities Grants.

## **57. Future Work Programme and Forward Plan of Key Decisions.**

The Committee considered the Forward Plan of Key Decisions and agreed to receive the draft Consideration of Growth Point Revenue Expenditure report by e-mail. The Chairman advised the Committee that the decision regarding the Review of Contaminated Land Strategy had been delayed. The Chairman was meeting with the Assistant Director of Environmental Services to discuss the remits of the officers' review and the Committee's review to prevent any overlaps.

A Councillor highlighted the importance of the Road Safety Review and the Committee agreed it would be worthwhile to present the report to Full Council, as this was where the topic had been initiated.

The Chairman informed the Committee that Councillor Robertson had requested that it consider how Park and Ride was to be re-launched and how to ensure customer confidence in the service. The Committee agreed to consider this item at its meeting on 27 October 2009. Furthermore, Members requested that the market research on customer reaction to changes in the scheme, undertaken in response to the Committee's recommendation on 18 December 2008, be presented to the Committee in addition to information on how the service had been publicised. The Committee agreed to invite Councillors Garland and Wooding, the Head of Communications and the Public Transport Officer to the meeting. A Member believed that a survey was being sent to residents and queried

whether a question on Park and Ride had been included in this. The Committee asked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to investigate this.

The Committee noted that its December meeting was scheduled for 22 December and agreed that this meeting be cancelled unless urgent business arose.


**Resolved:** That

- a) Members of the Committee receive the draft Consideration of Growth Point Revenue Expenditure report by email;
- b) The Road Safety Review Report be presented to Full Council;
- c) Perceptions and usage of Park and Ride be considered at the Committee's meeting on 27 October 2009;
- d) The Overview and Scrutiny Officer determine whether a question regarding Park and Ride was being asked as part of any current survey work; and
- e) The meeting of the Committee on 22 December be cancelled unless urgent business arose.

**58. Duration of Meeting.**


6.30 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.






## HOUSING ADAPTATIONS

A Presentation to MBC Scrutiny  
Committee  
Tuesday 29 September 2009  
Jillie Smithies and Eileen Parrott




## What we will cover ...

- MHT Approach
- Current Issues
- Best Practice
- Moving Forward
- Wider Initiatives
- Sector Issues
- Areas to Explore




## MHT Approach

- What we do
- How we deliver the service – refer to flowchart
- What resources are used - internally/externally
- How much do we spend
- How long does it take
- What is the level of demand
- How has expenditure been accounted for since transfer
- Current Policy
- Our performance – internal and external audit assessment




## Current Issues

- OT assessments
- Pilot approach to 20 DFG applications
- DGF approvals 09/10: 16 with MBC for approval – 6 complete. 14 outstanding.
- Supporting residents effectively - now addressed via Property Advisors/Support Coordinators
- Variances in cost of works – retendered key standard components and Schedule of Rates. Split risk – 2 contractors



## Best Practice

- Clarity on major / minor split
- Clear process with target timescales
- Arrangements for ongoing maintenance in place
- OT advice on all majors and some minors
- Prioritisation
- Support for residents on DFG applications
- Post inspection and satisfaction testing – joint inspection with MBC on % sample
- Regular liaison with OT / MBC / MHT
- Adaptations as part of Planned Investment



## Moving Forward

- Process in line with other RP's
- Responding to common issues across the sector
- Needs led service
- Value For Money approach – reuse/recycle adapted properties, restrictions to future works, links to common allocations system, effective procurement
- Trusted assessor training to maximise effective use of OT resources
- Case studies as examples of proactive/imaginative work to secure effective solutions

## Wider Initiatives



- Kent Housing Group – Sub group reviewing A&A led by Tunbridge Wells
- Peer group comparison
- Learning from Audit Commission inspection reports – focus on delivery not strategy

## Sector Issues



- Quality of life impact
- Inconsistency: level of investment; thresholds for major / minor
- Access to DFG – mandatory grant
- Profile of stock and customers
- Means testing for non DFG funded work? Top up?
- Developing new homes – full wheelchair standard doesn't necessarily respond appropriately to demand
  - Understanding demand – volumes/location/aspirations/bespoke adaptations
  - LA strategic housing role – ensuring sufficient supply of the right type or size in the right place
  - Provider role – meeting additional cost/design briefs
- Maintenance costs and service charges
- Lettings / Allocations policies
  - Flexibility for those needing adapted properties
  - Mobility – enhancements planned to CBL
- RP responsibility for external environment - Healthchecks

## Areas to Explore



- Lifetime Homes
  - New development
  - DHS+ - is this affordable / deliverable
- Future demand informed by STATUS / Customer Profile Survey
- Publish named contact
- Update leaflet / Website
- Funding for replacement items
- Robust suite of KPIs
- Pre allocation of bespoke adapted voids – how to make this work in context of CBL

## Housing Adaptations Process – Major Works

