

Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-06-09 (p3): 28 April 2009

Family Experience of Accessing Disabled facilities Grants and Collaborative Research Study in Wales and Northern Ireland an Independent Report by Shelter Cymru Contact a Family and Family information 2008

Recommendation

Local authorities in Wales and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive must take action to reduce delays in the time from initial enquiry to completion. One possible mechanism might include automatic acceptance of Occupational Therapist referrals, reducing assessment times and time spent on disputes. A second mechanism might require local authorities to establish a service level agreement with contractors, therefore reducing the time spent searching for and commissioning contractors.

Comment

These are matters for local authorities and the WLGA although we have exhorted local authorities to reduce delays in the system. The Syniad Benchmarking report of 2001 published by the WLGA and which the Welsh Assembly Government part funded, focused on reducing delays and publishing good practice. The current Phase 2 benchmarking exercise that the WLGA is finalising is also relevant. The College of Occupational Therapists would also need to comment particularly in respect of the automatic acceptance of OT referrals. See comments made in respect of recommendation 33 of the "Review of Housing Adaptations Including Disabled Facilities Grants - Wales" (March 2005) regarding the use of non-OT qualified staff in assessing minor adaptations.

Recommendation

The Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Housing Executive should consider whether further funding is required for DFGs. This study does not provide adequate evidence to conclude that further funding is required but such action might reduce the occurrence of gatekeeping, where local authorities deter parents from making an application because of limited funds.

Comment

Funding is unencumbered and local authorities have the flexibility to use as much of their General Capital Funding for DFGs as they need to meet demand and their local priorities. This is particularly important in view of their mandatory nature. Chris Jones in his Review of Housing Adaptations Including Disabled Facilities Grants - "Wales concluded that 'housing budgets almost entirely meet the costs of DFGs and adaptations' and that the major problems encountered are administrative and systemic in nature.

Recommendation

Although improvements are possible for all types of adaptation, local authorities in Wales and NIHE should target improvements at larger scale adaptations because experiences appear to be particularly negative for these applications. Local authorities should consider allocating specific officers to deal with adaptations that exceed £15,000.

Comment

This is entirely appropriate for children DFGs where the needs of disabled children can change markedly in childhood and puberty necessitating larger-scale adaptations. The current grant limit of £36,000 in Wales should accommodate these larger scale adaptations. The latter is not such a necessity for older people.

Recommendation

The Welsh Assembly Government and NIHE should introduce guidance on greater service user involvement for the authorities administering grants. The guidance should ensure that parents have the opportunity to comment on their requirements and these comments should be valued.

Comment

This is primarily aimed at the specific requirements of children and the vital need for parents to be fully involved in the decision-making process. For all DFG clients Annex D of National Assembly for Wales Circular 20/02 (NAW 20/02) paragraph 35 makes it clear that 'disabled people should be at the heart of service-delivery. They must be fully involved in the DFG process both by being able to express their needs and choices and by being kept fully informed of progress and of any difficulties which are being encountered'. The guidance also emphasises the important advocacy role that Care and Repair and other agency-type organisations can provide on behalf of older, disabled clients.

Recommendation

The Welsh Assembly Government should monitor approaches that local authorities take towards delivering housing adaptations,

offering advice where approaches are perceived to be poor practice. In addition, the Welsh Assembly Government and the NIHE should promote and fund services that enable parents to challenge poor decisions.

Comment

The Assembly Government has been involved in the two WLGA benchmarking exercises. In her letter to the then Leader of the Welsh Local Government Association (April 2005) the then Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration emphasised that as well as the Assembly Government there will be a significant role for local authorities to take forward many of the recommendations from the Review of Housing Adaptations report. She also saw 'a major monitoring role for the WLGA in implementing the report's recommendations'.

Recommendation

The Welsh Assembly Government and NIHE should consider increasing the £30,000 limit for DFGs in order to ensure that all necessary adaptations can be completed.

Comment

As a result of The Disabled Facilities Grants (Maximum Amounts and Additional Purposes) (Wales) Regulations 2008 the maximum amount of grant in Wales is £36,000. This compares with £30,000 in England.