

Equality of Opportunity Committee

EOC(3)-07-09 (p2): 12 May 2009

Inquiry into Home Maintenance and Adaptation services for older people in Wales

Introductory Statement

Community Housing Cymru (CHC) is a registered charity and the representative body for housing associations and community housing mutuels in Wales, which are all not-for-profit organisations. Our members provide over 112,000 homes and related housing services across Wales. Our members employ the equivalent of over 3000 full-time staff and spend over £300m in the Welsh economy every year. We are also active in community regeneration throughout Wales, including some of its most deprived communities. We aim to enable members to work effectively and flourish in Wales by:

Positively promoting housing associations as non-statutory, non-profit, ethical providers of affordable housing, support and community regeneration services

Seeking to develop a political, regulatory and financial framework that supports housing association activities

Developing, supporting and disseminating good practice

Encouraging and enabling members to provide accessible homes in sustainable communities throughout Wales

Working in partnership with key bodies in Wales.

According to the 2004 Living in Wales survey, some 14.5% of tenants over retirement age were tenants of housing associations and related bodies. We would expect that proportion to have increased since 2004, as a result of subsequent transfers of stock from local authorities.

Community Housing Cymru's evidence

Community Housing Cymru (then the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations) was closely involved in the 2006 review of Housing Adaptations and Disabled Facilities Grant. More recently, in response to the Essex Report on Affordable Housing, the Assembly Government introduced a fast-track procedure for Physical Adaptations Grant (PAG), which applies to applications for PAG in respect of installation of stairlifts, level access showers and associated fittings, and access aids such as ramps and door widening. Guidance on the procedure was issued in May 2008 and by the end of that month some two-thirds of our then members had registered their interest in using it.

This fast track procedure appears to be working well. In general, our members suggest that the application process is straightforward and that grant payments are received promptly. Associations find the ability to get on with the work, and then batch invoices as part of the application process, very helpful.

The picture is less clear in respect of PAG for larger-scale works: although our members have not reported any substantial concerns about the operation of this part of the programme, neither have they made positive suggestions that it is working well. We are therefore, at present, unable to comment further on this subject.

There are two areas where we do have specific concerns in relation to PAG. One is that questions can arise about ownership of, and responsibility for, components installed under PAG (or indeed other adaptation programmes). There is an ongoing debate within the sector about whether maintenance of these components can be included in service charges. Associations note that for tenants who are not on Housing Benefit, inclusion of these costs in service charges can be worryingly expensive. However, we recognise that tenancy and Housing Benefit law are not devolved matters and are therefore not the responsibility of the Assembly or Assembly Government.

The second area of concern relates to the level of funding available for adaptation services. There is a high and increasing demand for adaptations, particularly under PAG; we estimate that PAG spending has increased from about £2.5 million in 2005/2006 to over £7 million in 2008/9. Since PAG is drawn down from Social Housing Grant (SHG) there is a question about whether PAG should be ring-fenced and subject to an annual cap. As the Committee will no doubt be aware, the relationship between PAG and SHG is currently being considered by the Essex Review Affordable Housing Delivery Workstream, which includes representatives from CHC.

At least one of our members hosts a Care and Repair service, and reports that a 'safety at home' budget provided by the local authority has extended some of the advantages of the fast-track PAG procedure to their clients: although grants are at a fairly modest level (maximum £550, rising to £750 in the near future) they do allow access works, shower seats and similar facilities to be provided quickly and effectively. The national Rapid Response Adaptations Programme (RRAP) for older people leaving or at risk of entering hospital or care has a lower grant limit (£350) but, again, is effective and valued.

However, our members' experience of Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) is less generally positive. Whilst it is acknowledged that some local authorities do exhibit good practice, DFG is generally seen as slower and more bureaucratic, and its means-tested nature may be seen as disadvantageous to service users. Administrative problems are seen to relate to insufficient access to Occupational Therapy (OT) services for assessment, delays by local authorities in approving specifications, and, sometimes, inflexible tendering and specification

requirements. We would, therefore, not support any proposal to merge PAG and DFG as things currently stand.

Community Housing Cymru

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