

## STAFFING LEVEL IN THE HOUSING IMPROVEMENTS TEAM

### 1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To present a business case for the vacant 0.5 FTE post of Operations Manager within the Housing Improvements Team to be increased to full time, and to request reinstatement of the funding for the original 0.5 FTE which was utilised to fund regradings within the Housing Service.

### 2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 Due to legislative changes with a resultant increase in workload, and a growth in demand for the service (particularly disabled adaptations); the team is no longer able to meet a high level of service delivery. This situation has been compounded by long-term staff shortages and difficulty in recruiting to the part-time Operations Manager post. These difficulties resulted in a waiting list being introduced 18 months ago for both grants and enforcement investigations. Currently there are 131 clients on the waiting list for a Disabled Facilities Grant (some of whom have had to wait over 12 months), and this is clearly not acceptable.
- 2.2 In addition it has just been confirmed that we have been successful in our bid to the Regional Housing Board for additional funding to assist with grants/loans for low income/vulnerable households in the New Forest, and have been awarded £445,000 for a three year period commencing April 2008. This will assist us in achieving the government policy and objectives for private sector housing – for example achieving the Decent Homes Standard for everyone.
- 2.3 For these reasons it is requested that the existing vacant part-time post of Operations Manager is increased to become a full-time post. This can be justified on the basis of increased demand and increasing workload, and will assist with the day-to-day management of the team and allow effective input in caseload management.

### 3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### 3.1 Team Role

- 3.1.1 The team provides a service in respect of all private sector housing issues in the New Forest District Council Area (which equates to 93% of all residential dwellings – the remaining 7% being NFDC housing stock).
- 3.1.2 In brief this includes the following:
- Disabled Facilities Grant adaptations to assist disabled persons in maintaining independence in their home (this service is available for all New Forest residents including NFDC tenants)
  - Financial assistance for low income/vulnerable home owners to help with essential repairs/improvements
  - Working with private landlords to improve standards in rented accommodation via accreditation
  - Investigation of complaints from private tenants relating to the repair etc of their accommodation

- Enforcement of standards in privately owned accommodation (in owner-occupied, tenanted & vacant properties). This can be either on an informal basis or where necessary by the service of a formal notice and court action)
- Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (bedsits and flats etc)

### 3.2 Current Team Structure

3.2.1 Following the Housing Restructure the Housing Improvements Team consists of two part-time Operation Managers jointly responsible for day-to-day supervision, 3 full-time Home Health and Safety Surveyors, 2 full-time Technical Support Administrators and 2 part-time Housing Occupational Therapists. Overall direction is provided by the Housing Technical Manager who is also responsible for the Planned Maintenance Team (with the role split approximately 50/50).

3.2.2 Due to the long-term sickness of two team members (both of whom have since retired on grounds of ill health), a total of 297 working days have been lost in the last 12 months, which has caused great difficulty in managing the workload of the team. Fortunately one post has recently been filled, but the second (part-time) post has been vacant since December 2005. The length of time the post has been vacant is partly due to the housing restructure, but it has been advertised on two occasions. The response each time was poor and in general terms the calibre of applicant did not meet our needs. This was unexpected as the post had been re-graded following evaluation as part of the restructure, and the reason for the disappointing response may have been due to the part time nature of the post.

### 3.3 Meeting Housing Standards in the Private Sector

3.3.1 The budget for financial assistance for essential repairs for low income/vulnerable owner occupied homes is £102,000 for 2008/09. This budget was significantly reduced approximately 2 years ago (from £435,000) due to a reduction in the level of capital receipts.

3.3.2 As a result, grants/loans from this source are now limited to essential repairs despite an identified need for a greater level of intervention. With a larger budget financial assistance (in the form of grants/loans) had been more widely available (e.g. to top up the cost of adaptations for severely disabled residents and to assist with repairs etc to meet the Decent Homes Standard).

3.3.3 We are on target to meet the Decent Homes Standard in NFDC-owned homes by the end of 2010, but are doing little to assist with any reduction in numbers in the private sector. Currently the numbers failing to meet the Decent Homes Standard in this sector stand at over 19%.

3.3.4 The Housing Standards element and the associated enforcement role is a mandatory service, and where a 'serious hazard' is identified we have a legal duty to take action (both in owner occupied homes and privately tenanted accommodation).

### 3.4 Demand for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs)

3.4.1 The private sector DFG budget for 2008/09 is expected to be £503,000, with the public sector DFG budget slightly less at £459,000.

- 3.4.2 As an average, each Home Health and Safety Surveyor completes 50 grants per year, with an average ongoing caseload of 70 at any one time (this is in addition to any complaint investigation/enforcement cases).
- 3.4.3 Despite this we are not able to keep up with the demand and this is demonstrated by the numbers on the waiting list (currently 131). If the request for an additional post is agreed I anticipate that we will still have to maintain a waiting list, but am hopeful that it would be reduced to more manageable proportions.
- 3.4.4 Over 30% of the New Forest District Council population are 60+, and this is easily the highest figure within Hampshire. Whilst this is only an indication of the likely level of demand for Disabled Facilities Grants it has been shown to be a reliable. It is interesting to note the current Disabled Facilities Grant allocations from the Government Office of the South East (GOSE) to local authorities in Hampshire doesn't seem to reflect this anticipated level of demand, but the method of assessment is likely to change in the next two years, and I anticipate that our budget will be increased to reflect this.
- 3.4.5 It is worth noting that Disabled Facilities Grants are mandatory, and where a client meets the application criteria, a Local Authority cannot refuse on grounds of lack of funds or staffing.

#### **4. OTHER CHANGES AFFECTING WORKLOAD**

##### **4.1 Additional Financial Assistance Funding for Grants/Loans**

- 4.1.1 We were fortunate to be successful in a joint bid with the assistance of PUSH to the Regional Housing Board (in partnership with 7 other local authorities in Hampshire). It has just been confirmed that the group have been awarded £1,881,000 for the 3 year period commencing April 2008. The New Forest allocation is detailed below:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount</b>
2008/09	£97,000
2009/10	£172,000
2010/2011	£176,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£445,000</b>

- 4.1.2 This is a significant achievement for the Housing Improvements team, but additional staff resources to effectively utilise this additional funding would assist with the project's success (and increase the likelihood of further funding being available beyond the 3 year term). It is intended that some of the funding will be recycled (and ring-fenced) for future usage.

- 4.1.3 Examples of funding packages that this would enable us to offer to low income/vulnerable households are listed below:
- provision of grants/loan packages to help meet the Decent Homes Standard in the private sector
  - top-up loans for larger disabled projects
  - assistance to move home where a disabled person's home cannot be adapted
  - help with improving energy efficiency to reduce fuel bills (particularly for the increasing number of families in fuel poverty)
  - bring empty properties back into use via an Empty Dwelling Management Order etc

## 4.2 Legislative Changes

4.2.1 The Housing Act 2004 introduced a number of radical changes for private sector housing (outlined below), all of which resulted have resulted in an increased workload.

### 4.2.2 Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS)

As an example, the method of assessment of housing standards changed from the 'Fitness Standard' to a risk assessment method called the 'Health and Safety Rating System'. The latter is far more complex and a full inspection utilising this approach takes significantly longer, and every property the team visits needs such an assessment. In addition, the number of homes failing this new standard is twice that failing the 'old fitness standard', resulting in a significant increase in potential workload. In real terms 4,272 dwellings in the New Forest have one or more 'serious hazard' failures costing in the region of £12,400 per dwelling to rectify – a total of almost £53 million! The Regional Housing Board funding will allow us to assist low income vulnerable occupants improve their homes to this new standard.

4.2.3 The team is also increasingly being asked to assist with a corporate approach to solving issues using the Housing Health and Safety System, as use of the associated enforcement tools has shown to be an effective tool in ensuring a property meets the required standard (e.g. we have worked with Building Control in relation to unauthorised works which resulted in the occupation of a building being potentially unsafe, and with planners to achieve repairs to a listed building).

### 4.2.4 Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

All Local Authorities now have to licence HMOs meeting specified criteria, and set up a system for this purpose. Although we have few HMOs to licence that meet this criteria, there is a considerable amount of work involved in achieving and operating a workable system. It is worth noting that the definition of an HMO also changed as part of this legislation and an increasing number are requiring licensing.

### 4.2.5 Changes to Modernise the DFG Process

# Attached at Appendix 1 is a paper produced for the Portfolio Holder to précis the changes to the DFG process, all of which have yet to be implemented. In the short term it will increase our expenditure, as the maximum grant limit will be raised by £5,000 to £30,000, and it is anticipated that this will further increase in the future (raising the limit to £50,000).

## 5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Following the restructure of the Housing Service, a number of changes were made within the Housing Improvements (HI) Team. The Housing Improvements Manager post was merged with the Housing Technical Manager post effectively reducing managerial input into the Housing Improvements Team by 50% and general fund salary costs by approximately £20,000 plus on costs. At the same time the 4 Surveyor posts were evaluated and re-graded to reflect new levels of responsibility. The overall effect was actually a reduction in annual salary costs for the team, but as the Management salary savings were reported earlier they are not reflected in the figures below.
- 5.2 The Surveyor salary costs in the Housing Improvements Team increased by £14,000 for the 2008/09 budget. These were initially covered by using part of the budget provision available as a result of the vacant part-time post of Operations Manager (band 8). As a result, although the post is still within the establishment, there is only £4,000 of funding currently allocated in this financial year.
- 5.3 Assuming an appointment was made at the mid point of band 8, if the post was filled to its current part-time hours, the additional costs would be £18,000. By increasing the post to full time, the budget shortfall would be £40,000.
- 5.4 The Council is obliged to operate the mandatory private sector DFG scheme and chooses to operate the public sector scheme for HRA tenants using the same principles. This is to ensure parity between public and private individuals, despite there being no statutory obligation to do so, although as a landlord we do have a responsibility to assist our disabled tenants.
- 5.5 The posts in the Housing Improvements Team (with the exception of the Housing Technical Manager) are currently all funded from the General Fund, regardless of whether they are dealing with public/private DFG schemes or other duties. An estimate of time spent on DFG's to HRA properties means that it would be appropriate to charge £53,000 to the HRA. This figure has been calculated by examining the amount of time the team spends on Disabled Facilities Grants for Council Tenants as a % of total time.
- 5.6 Following the transfer of a number of posts and associated duties from Housing Planned Maintenance to Commercial Services, there are two and a half vacant posts within Planned Maintenance. The half post is no longer required. As a result there is already £22,000 of HRA funding that can be used towards the full-time Operations Manager.
- 5.7 On the basis of an appointment date of 1 October 2008, the FTE Operations Manager can be funded entirely from the HRA during 2008/09 by virement of funding from the Housing Planned Maintenance Section. For 2009/10 a HRA expenditure plan bid of £31,000 (being the £53,000 total allocation less the £22,000 existing funding) would be required.
- 5.8 However, this would be offset by a £13,000 reduction to the General Fund. This saving would arise because the allocation to the HRA (£53,000) would exceed the cost of the FTE Operations Manager post (£44,000) and the existing General Fund budget of £4,000 would be removed.

## **6. LINK TO CORPORATE AIMS AND KEY PRIORITIES**

The Housing Improvements Service makes a valuable contribution towards a number of corporate aims and key priorities, notably in terms of organisational excellence (promoting equal opportunity and diversity) and social wellbeing (housing, social inclusion, and young and older people).

## **7. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

As a result of the Regional Housing Board funding financial Assistance will be available to assist with security measures to improve home security reducing both real and perceived fear of crime within the home environment.

## **8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

To assist in sustaining the housing stock and help local people remain within the community

## **9. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS**

The service promotes equal opportunity in two main ways. Firstly to enable disabled persons to independently access a normal home environment and improve social inclusion within the community, and secondly in ensuring safe and healthy accommodation for all.

## **10. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS**

Councillor Jill Cleary (Housing)

'I fully support the recommendation in this report as it will allow effective service delivery of the private sector housing function taking into account the increased workload and expanding areas of responsibility'.

Councillor Maureen Holding (Employment Health and Wellbeing)

'This service strongly supports the responsibilities of my portfolio, and the additional staff member will help the team to achieve a more timely response reducing waiting times for disabled adaptations & improving health and social wellbeing in improving living conditions'.

## **11. RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that Cabinet:

- a) Approve the appointment of a full time Operations Manager Post at a total cost of £44,000 and provide additional budget resources of £40,000 (£4,000 currently provided);
- b) Note the change in accounting treatment to reflect the correct apportionment of cost related to Disabled Facilities Grants between the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account; and

- c) Approve the resultant budget requirements of the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account of both the change in accounting treatment and the appointment of a full time Operation Manager as follows:

2008/09 Budget

Note the saving to the General Fund of £35,000 generated from the transfer of £53,000 to the Housing Revenue Account and the estimated budget impact of £18,000 representing the Operations Manager being in post for six months (i.e. £22,000 less the existing budget provision of £4,000)

Approve a supplementary estimate for the Housing Revenue Account for £31,000, being the revised apportionment of costs for Disabled Facilities Grants of £53,000 less the budget virement from the Planned Maintenance section of £22,000.

2009/10 & Future Years

Approve within the Housing Revenue Account Expenditure plans the ongoing £31,000 budget. Approve the ongoing saving within the General Fund of £13,000 (i.e. the budget virement of £53,000 less the additional budget cost of £40,000 for the Operations Manager).

**For Further Information Please Contact:**

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**Background Papers:**

Published papers

## PACKAGE OF CHANGES TO DISABLED FACILITIES GRANTS (DFG)

On 25 February 2008 the CLG published '*Disabled Facilities Grant – The Package of Changes to Modernise the Programme*'. This document provides an outline of the changes detailed in this publication both for April 2008 and in the longer term, with some thoughts on how the changes will affect the programme in the New Forest.

### Changes from May 2008 (exact date of implementation to be confirmed)

- **Change to Grant Limit**  
Maximum grant limit to be raised from £25,000 to £30,000 (and this will be kept under review – there is discussion re raising it to £50,000). This is long overdue and will help those most severely disabled, but will significantly increase expenditure.
- **Changes to Test of Resources**  
DFG applicants on Council Tax Benefit, Housing Benefit and Tax Credits for those on low income will no longer be required to provide additional financial information (streamlining application process)  
  
DFG applicants in receipt of Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit will no longer have these payments counted as income in the DFG means test (directly helping families on low incomes)
- **Property Charges**  
Local Authorities will have the discretion to impose a charge against owner-occupied properties – and it is envisaged that any funds reclaimed in this way will be recycled back into the DFG programme. This will apply where the cost of the DFG exceeds £5,000, but limited to a maximum charge of £10,000 – and will be applicable for a 10 year period. This is good news, as it will assist in funding for future years and will deter the few that move and reapply for the same works at a new home.
- **Eligibility Criteria**  
Access to gardens will be a specific criterion for entitlement for a DFG where this is 'reasonable and practicable'. Currently the legislation allows for only one access, and this is likely to significantly increase expenditure in providing ramps and pathways to rear gardens.
- **Funding & Relaxation of Ring Fence**  
Currently DFG funding is split 60:40 between central government and Local Authority resources. From 2008/09 this will no longer apply and the allocation we receive will not have to be match funded by 40% from our resources. This is unlikely to reduce our actual financial contribution, as DFGs will remain mandatory (and lack of funds is not a reason for refusal to assist).

At the same time the ring-fence will be 'relaxed' and scope of DFG funding will be widened to support any local authority expenditure under the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) – the idea being that we can use DFG money for wider purposes in a manner more appropriate for the individual (e.g. moving home where it isn't possible to adapt).

- **Re-designation of Stair lifts**

Initially it was intended that stair lifts would be re-designated as equipment (and supplied by Hampshire County Council via Adult and Children's Services rather than via a DFG) but this is not now going to happen. Central government hope that the relaxation of the ring-fence will create sufficient flexibility to allow local authorities to loan and recycle stair lifts – and will be monitoring this change.

## **Proposed Longer-Term Changes**

- **Removal of the Ring-Fence**

Central Government are piloting the complete removal of the Ring-Fence for 18 months from 2008/09 4 Local Authorities, and this is likely to be extended to all local authorities in 2010/11. A major concern if this goes ahead is that the DFG 'pot' would then be pooled with other larger funding sources (social care etc) – so we would need to ensure this area of work receives the priority it needs to maintain the independence of disabled persons in their homes.

- **Funding for Local Authority Tenants**

The DFG framework and mandatory aspect of the grant applies across all tenures, however the DFG budget cannot be used for the funding of adaptations to local authority properties at present.

Following the evaluation of the pilots (Ring-Fence Removal) and the outcome of the HRA Subsidy review, a decision will be taken on allowing all local authorities to access the Single Capital Pot for adaptations for council tenants.

- **Funding Adaptations to Registered Social Landlord (RSL) Tenants**

There is some confusion and duplication in funding disabled adaptations in RSLs. RSL tenants have the same right to apply for a DFG as other private tenants and owner occupiers, but RSLs also receive some funding specifically for this and are expected to assist their tenants. However in practice, their limited budget makes this a rarity, and generally the DFG funds this. Central Government and the Housing Corporation have said that they will issue guidance relating to this shortly.

- **DFG Test of Resources**

Further work will be undertaken over the next year to modernise and simplify the process. It is currently based on the system used for Housing Benefit and is very complicated and also fails to take into account some household outgoings effectively (e.g. housing costs can only be a set figure and do not accurately represent most households actual expenditure in this area).

- **Application Process**

Linked to the test of resources review, work will also be undertaken to reduce the bureaucratic nature of the current process and streamline the process (this will need a change in legislation).

- **Allocation of DFG Funds**

Currently the DFG budget is divided up between the regions using a formula which takes into account data from the English House Condition Survey regarding the number of disabled persons in each region living in unsuitable housing and a regional building cost index. GOSE is then responsible for overseeing the allocation within the region. When looking at other Local Authority allocations within the south east area this doesn't seem to adequately reflect the needs in NFDC – so a change in calculation methods may assist us. Options are being worked on over the next few months with a view to establishing a new approach by the end of the year – and to inform allocations from 2009/10 onwards.

- **DFG and Individual Budgets**  
 The DFG is one of six funding streams involved in the trial of the individual budget approach being tested in 13 different Local Authority pilots. A full evaluation of this approach and what it means for the DFG will be made in due course.
- **Strategic Planning**  
 Guidance will be issued re this addressing the need for accessible housing and the provision of adaptations within the Housing Strategy.
- **New Rapid Repairs and Adaptations Services**  
 CLG will provide new national funding through the National Strategy for Housing in an Ageing Society for rapid repairs and minor adaptations from 2009 to enable a further 125,000 older people per year to get help.
- **Future Home Improvement Agency (HIA) Project**  
 The DFG consultation proposed that the role of the Home Improvement Agency in delivering adaptations should be enhanced, and this suggestion received majority support from those who expressed a view. As a result central government have commissioned Foundations to develop a service which will offer more and better housing options etc
- **DFG Name change**  
 It was proposed to re-name DFGs to Accessible Homes Grants, but due to the cost implications this will not be taken forward at this stage.