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Service User Perspective of Disabled Facilities Grants – **Bridgend County Borough Council**

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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Sara Jane Byrne and Martin Gibson under the direction of Huw Rees.

Contents

Most service users we spoke to were happy with the housing adaptations service, but the Council is not maximising opportunities to improve the service and deliver value for money.

Summary report 4

Detailed Report

The Council has clear aims for the housing adaptations service, recognising the difference it can make to people's lives, but the actions it has identified to improve the service are limited. 7

Most service users we spoke to are happy with the housing adaptations service and feel that the adaptations have helped them with their needs. 8

Most service users found the application process easy, but the Council receives regular queries which it is not best placed to answer as other outside parties become involved as the project progresses. 9

The Council could do more to help service users make informed choices about which agent and builder to use and to strengthen its oversight of them, particularly ensuring that builders are safe to work in the homes of vulnerable people 10

Most service users we spoke to were satisfied with the time it took for the Council to approve their housing adaptation, but the overall time taken for the Council to deliver adaptations has increased in recent years 12

There is scope for the Council to strengthen its arrangements for evaluating the housing adaptations service to help it learn and improve the service 13

Summary report

Summary

What we looked at

- 1 In 2017-18, the Wales Audit Office completed work to understand the 'service user perspective' at every council within Wales. We followed a broadly similar approach at each council but agreed the specific focus and approach to the work individually. In Bridgend County Borough Council (the Council), we focussed on the housing adaptation/disabled facilities grants service. In particular, we sought to answer the question: do the needs, experiences and aspirations of service users inform the design and delivery of services to more closely meet their needs? 'Involvement' is one of the five ways of working identified in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.
- 2 The review focussed primarily upon the service user experience of the housing adaptation/disabled facilities grant process, but we did consider the earlier assessment process before the building work begins.
- 3 The findings in this report are based on fieldwork that we undertook during the period June to July 2018. We conducted a telephone survey of 54 of the 222 service users who had received disabled facilities grant and had the works completed in their home in the previous year. We also interviewed a selection of senior officers and operational staff from the Council's housing adaptations service. We also spoke with senior officers of a Registered Social Landlord, Valleys to Coast Housing Limited¹, Bridgend Care and Repair Service² and reviewed Council documents.
- 4 We have also drawn upon the findings and recommendations of the Auditor General for Wales' report on Housing Adaptations³.
- 5 We concluded that most service users we spoke to were happy with the housing adaptations service, but the Council is not maximising opportunities to improve the service and deliver value for money. We came to this conclusion because:

¹ Valleys to Coast Housing Limited (V2C) is a not for profit organisation. It provides management, maintenance and improvement services to 5,800 rented homes, all within the area of Bridgend Council. V2C was established through a housing stock transfer from the Council in 2003. www.v2c.org.uk

² Bridgend County Care and Repair was established in 1988 to promote independent living for older and disabled people living in Bridgend. Their aim is to provide high quality expertise, advice and practical support to people aged over 50 years who need to undertake repairs, renovations or adaptations to their home. This is done to help homeowners or private sector tenants remain living at home independently, comfortably, safely and securely. www.careandrepair.org.uk

³ Auditor General for Wales report on Housing Adaptations. This report looks at whether public bodies, with responsibilities for delivering housing adaptations, have an effective strategic approach that delivers value for money, published in February 2018 www.audit.wales/publication/housing-adaptations

- The Council has clear aims for the housing adaptations service recognising the difference it can make to people's lives, but the actions it has identified to improve the service are limited.
- Most service users we spoke to are happy with the housing adaptations service and feel that the adaptations have helped them with their needs.
- Most service users found the application process easy, but the Council receives regular queries which it is not best placed to answer as other outside parties become involved as the project progresses.
- The Council could do more to help service users make informed choices about which agent and builder to use and to strengthen its oversight of them, particularly ensuring that builders are safe to work in the homes of vulnerable people.
- Most service users we spoke to were satisfied with the time it took for the Council to approve their housing adaptation, but the overall time taken for the Council to deliver adaptations has increased in recent years.
- There is scope for the Council to strengthen its arrangements for evaluating the housing adaptations service to help it learn and improve the service.

Proposals for Improvement

Exhibit 1 – proposals for Improvement

The table below sets out the proposals for improvement that we have identified following this review.

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council should consider more broadly how its housing adaptations service can contribute to meeting its strategic aim ‘To ensure that Bridgend County is a place that people want to live, where there is a choice of good quality, affordable, and sustainable housing, appropriate to the needs of each household’ and the medium and longer-term actions needed to do this. In doing so, it should consider how it can apply the five ways of working from the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act to help it do this and the Social Services and Well-being Act.
P2	The Council should strengthen its arrangements for evaluating the housing adaptations service to help the Council improve the service. This includes improving the design of the service user survey and extending it to include all service users and to increase awareness of the survey and the results across the organisation.
P3	The Council should help service users understand the often-complicated process that involves multiple organisations by providing a clear and simple overview of the grant process from beginning to end.
P4	<p>The Council should fully implement the recommendations made by the Auditor General for Wales’ in his report in 2018 on housing adaptations, most notably Recommendation 6 to introduce formal systems for accrediting contractors to undertake adaptations including developing effective systems to manage and evaluate contractor performance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Council should ensure it has arrangements in place to monitor and manage the performance of third parties involved in the DFG process. This performance information should be shared with service users to inform their decision upon which agent and builder to engage for their housing adaptation.• Formally accrediting contractors and continually monitoring user satisfaction will satisfy the Council that adequate safeguards are in place to protect vulnerable service users when builders are entering their homes.
P5	The Council needs to assure itself that it has appropriate controls in place to provide effective oversight of the adaptations process, given it is ultimately responsible for the delivery of the adaptation.

Most service users we spoke to were happy with the housing adaptations service, but the Council is not maximising opportunities to improve the service and deliver value for money

The Council has clear aims for the housing adaptations service recognising the difference it can make to people's lives, but the actions it has identified to improve the service are limited

- 6 The Council has defined the strategic aims and objectives of the housing adaptations service, and the powers under which it can take action, in its Private Sector Housing Renewal and Disabled Adaptations Policy 2016. In its Operational and Partnership Services Directorate Business Plan 2017-2018, the Council states a strategic aim of the Council is: 'To ensure that Bridgend County is a place that people want to live, where there is a choice of good quality, affordable, and sustainable housing, appropriate to the needs of each household.' In support of this strategic aim, the Council has identified a series of improvement priorities which include: Helping people to be more self-reliant (Improvement Priority Two).
- 7 To help meet this strategic aim, the Council has set its Sustainable Renewal Officer two tasks, to:
 - develop a questionnaire to be sent to grant recipients following completion of works to enable relevant data to be captured; and
 - liaise with Social Services Occupational Therapy team, Care & Repair and other agencies to prevent the same data being requested from grant recipients and possible information overload on elderly recipients.
- 8 However, the impact of these actions on meeting the Council's strategic aim and upon the experience of service users will be limited. The Council should consider more broadly how its housing adaptations service can contribute to meeting its aim and the medium and longer-term actions needed to do this. In doing so, it should consider how it can apply the five ways of working⁴ from the Well-being of Future

⁴ The Well-being of Future Generations Act states that to act in accordance with the sustainable development principle '...which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' the prescribed public bodies public bodies must take account of the 'five ways of working'. These are: • looking to the long term so that they do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; • taking an integrated approach so that they look at all the well-being goals in deciding on their well-being objectives; • involving a diversity of the population in the decisions that affect them; • working with others in a collaborative way to find shared, sustainable solutions; and • understanding the root causes of issues to prevent them from occurring or getting worse.

Generations (Wales) Act to help it do this.

Most service users we spoke to are happy with the housing adaptations service and feel that the adaptations have helped them with their needs

- 9 In our survey of service users, 94% of respondents felt that the adaptation helped them with the needs they have. 96% were satisfied with the overall quality of the housing adaptations service provided by the Council.
- 10 Responsibility for the housing adaptation changes as the process progresses and the Council does not have control over every stage. The role of an agent in the DFG process is, for a fee, to support the service user through the whole building process. Whilst using an Agent is optional, only one of 222 the service users who completed the DFG process in the last year did not use the services of an Agent.
- 11 Last year, Bridgend County Care and Repair were the agent for 170 of the 222 housing adaptations projects. Bridgend County Care and Repair asked the service users that had employed them to for their views once the adaptations work had been completed. Ninety-seven service users had their adaptations completed during the period October 2017 to March 2018. Bridgend County Care and Repair's short telephone survey asked these service users three questions:
 - Had the adaptation helped them and made a difference?
 - Had the adaptation enabled them to become more independent?
 - Did they have any further comments?
- 12 The results of Bridgend County Care and Repair's survey are less positive than the results of our telephone survey. The results of the Bridgend Care and Repair's survey show that:
 - 57 of the 97 (59%) service users said that the housing adaptation had helped them and had made a difference;
 - 50 of the 97 service users (52%) said that the housing adaptation had enabled them to become more independent; and
 - 28 of the 97 (29%) service commented – with the vast majority of comments being positive about their experience and complimentary of the service received.
- 13 Using the findings of Bridgend County Care and Repair Survey, the Council has set itself an outcome focused, performance measure to help it understand the impact of the service better: 'The percentage of people who feel they are able to live more independently as a result of receiving an adaptation to their home, with a target being set of 75%.
- 14 Whilst we acknowledge that Bridgend County Care and Repair's survey data is only for one six-month time period, it suggests that the Council is unlikely to achieve its target of 75% of people who feel they are able to live more independently as a result

of receiving an adaptation to their home. Therefore, the Council needs to consider what it needs to do to improve the experiences and outcomes for service users.

Most service users found the DFG application process easy, but the Council receives regular queries which it is not best placed to answer as other outside parties become involved as the project progresses

- 15 In our survey, 78% of those we spoke to found the application process very easy or easy. 6% of service users found it difficult and 11% found it neither easy or difficult. 52% of those we spoke to contacted the Council with questions or comments during the application stage of the process.
- 16 Almost all recipients of a housing adaptation and DFGs are referred by health organisations to the Council's Team Manager for Community Services. When received by the Council, all referrals are categorised as either urgent or routine (urgent – week to 10 days; routine – in chronologic order). The appropriate adaptation works, and the appropriateness of a DFG, is only decided upon once the service user and their housing situation have been assessed by an Occupational Therapist (OT).
- 17 The OT carries out the assessment and suggests the most appropriate adaptation, primarily based upon practicality and cost. Other considerations include family care, residential care, and other options. The full extent of the options considered by the assessment are not always conveyed to the service users. Consequently, service users may be of the opinion that they have not been offered other options by the Council. Of the 54 service users we spoke to, 59% said that they were offered other services instead of going straight to the adaptation, but 41% said they were not. In our survey 85% of service users felt that their needs, views and wishes were fully taken into account when their need for an adaptation was assessed by the Council. 28 (52%) of the 54 service users who we surveyed told us that they contacted the Council with a query during the application process; with three of the service users not being clear who to contact.
- 18 A typical housing adaptation project that receives a DFG follows a process that involves a range of parties:

<u>Stage</u>	<u>Activity</u>	<u>By whom</u>
1	Referral and Assessment	Council Social Services
2	DFG application and award	Council DFG service and Service User
3	Appointment of Agent	Service User
4	Obtain quotes from approved builders	Agent

5	Consideration of quotes	Council, DFG service
6	Appoint builder	Agent and Service User
7	Undertake the building works	Builder
8	Assess works and finalise DFG	Council, DFG service

- 19 The Council could help service users understand the often-complicated process by documenting the pathway from approaching the Council to having the completed works assessed.

The Council could do more to help service users make informed choices about which agent and builder to use and to strengthen its oversight of them, particularly ensuring that builders are safe to work in the homes of vulnerable people

- 20 In the Council's process, it is the applicant's responsibility to appoint the building contractor to deliver the housing adaptation. This can be by themselves or with the help of a delivery agent, such as Bridgend County Care and Repair. 80% of the service users we spoke to rated the Council's assistance with appointing building contractors as good or very good.
- 21 It is positive that the Council gives the service user choice about which agent and builder to use. This is consistent with the principles of the Social Services and Well-being Act, which aims to give people more of a say in the care and support they receive.
- 22 Currently, the Council provides the applicant with a list of agents but is not able to tell the service user about the capacity that each agent has to progress the project, as it does not collect this information. Furthermore, the agent is unable to tell the service user of the capacity that the builders have to undertake the building works, or their track record of performance in completing works and the quality of these works. The capacity of the builder to undertake the building works is an important factor in addition to the financial cost and quality when considering overall value for money.
- 23 The Auditor General for Wales' report in 2018 on housing adaptations found that most local authorities, housing associations and Care and Repair agencies have established processes to appoint, oversee and manage builder and/or contractor performance. However, he found wide variations in how delivery organisations arrange, contract and deliver building works. He recommended that delivery organisations introduce formal systems for accrediting contractors to undertake adaptations, including developing effective systems to manage and evaluate contractor performance by:
- setting an appropriate range of information to judge performance and delivery of

works covering timeliness of work; quality of work; service user feedback; cost of work (including variations); health and safety record; and customer feedback;

- regularly reporting and evaluating performance to identify opportunities to improve services; and
- providing formal feedback to contractors on their performance covering issues such as service user satisfaction, level and acceptability of variations, right first-time work, post-inspection assessment and completion within budget and on time.

24 Our review found that the Council has not yet fully addressed this recommendation.

25 Currently, the Council does not have any direct involvement in the appointment and vetting of builders that undertake work in the houses of DFG recipients, potentially vulnerable households. The appointment of builders is managed by the agent appointed by the service user. The Bridgend County Care and Repair service managed 170 of the 222 (77%) housing adaptations through the disabled facilities grant from June 2017 until July 2018. It has arrangements in place to assess and monitor builders that they recommend to service users. However, the Council was unable to confirm that this was the case for the remaining 52 or 23% of housing adaptations.

26 During our telephone survey, one service user stated: 'The Council sent me out a form - I thought the form was complaining about the builder rather than giving my views on the job or if my needs were met. So, I didn't look at the form as I just wanted to forget about the bad experience and the horrible man.'

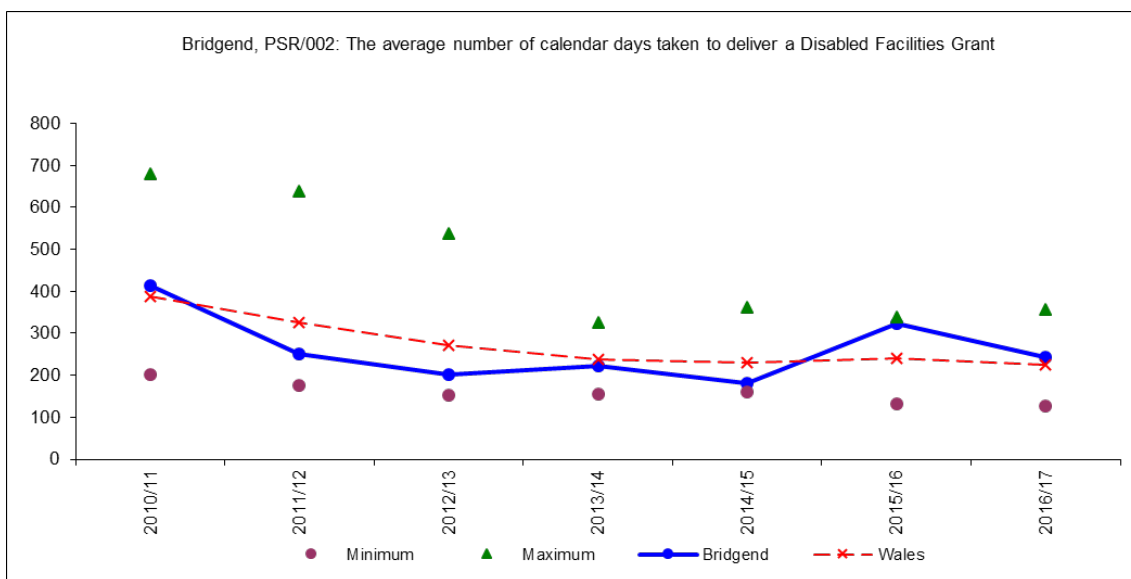
27 Another service user commented: 'The first builder didn't want the work as the job was too small, so he passed it to the second builder. The owner of the company was intimidating. I complained about an aspect of the work to him and he ended up making me cry.'

28 The Council's arrangements for DFGs passes the responsibility onto the service user to directly engage the builder, with the help of an agent when one is appointed. However, given the views expressed by some of the service users during our telephone survey, the Council should satisfy itself that adequate safeguards are in place to protect vulnerable service users when builders enter their homes.

Most service users we spoke to were satisfied with the time it took for the Council to approve their housing adaptation, but the overall time taken for the Council to deliver adaptations has increased in recent years

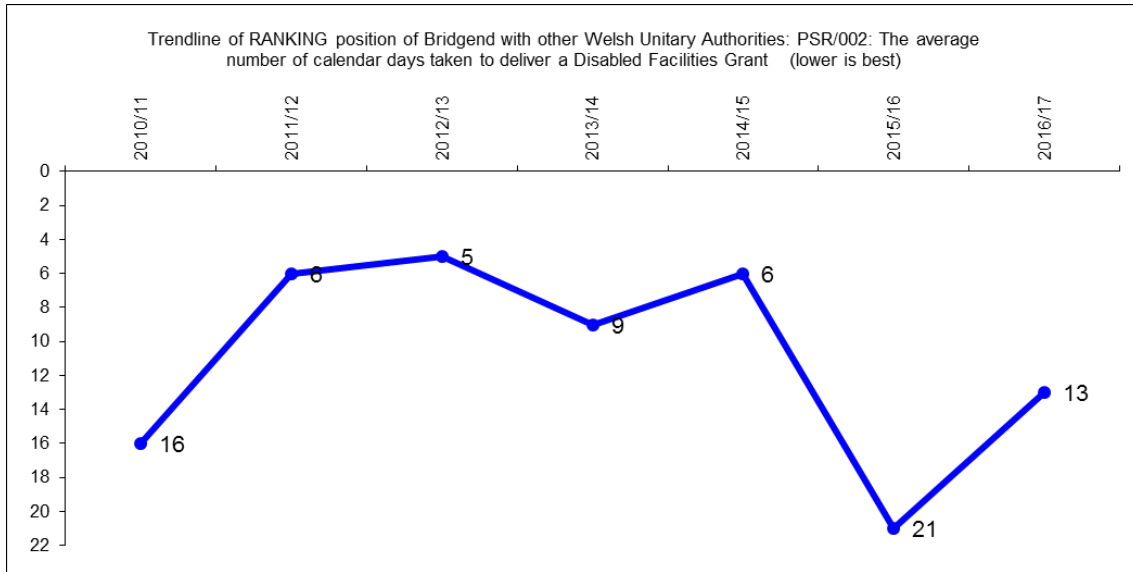
- 29 In our telephone survey with service users, 85% of the people we spoke to were either very satisfied or satisfied with the time it took the Council to approve their housing adaptation. 9% were fairly dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the time taken to approve their adaptations.
- 30 Within the suite of Public Accountability Measures (PAM) that are defined by the Welsh Local Government Association, and managed by Data Cymru, is a performance indicator (PI) entitled the average number of calendar days to deliver a Disabled Facilities Grant. All Welsh councils have agreed to record and publish their performance on this PI every year. **Exhibit 2** is the Council's annual performance for this indicator for the last seven years, where lower is better.
- 31 In comparison with the other Welsh councils, Bridgend's performance was above the average for Wales for the four years 2011-12 through to 2014-15. Bridgend's actual and comparative performance declined in 2015-16. Whilst improving both in actual and comparative terms in 2016-17, its performance still failed to be above the Welsh average. **Exhibit 3** depicts the comparative performance of the Council's performance.

Exhibit 2 – Bridgend Council's annual performance continually improved every year during the period 2010-11 through to 2014-15, but has since failed to achieve that standard in the last two years



Source: Wales Audit Office analysis of Data Cymru data

Exhibit 3 – Bridgend’s comparative performance with other Welsh councils has been below average for the last two years



Source: Wales Audit Office analysis of Data Cymru data

- 32 The Council has restructured its community team and lost a significant proportion of its experienced workforce. We were told by the Council that the whole referrals process now takes a lot longer than it did a few years ago. This is supported by the Council’s performance illustrated in the diagrams above. Significant delays in assessment are likely to have a detrimental effect upon the service users’ ability to continue living in their own home.
- 33 The Council does not have ultimate control over every stage in the DFG process. It hands over the process to the service user to appoint an agent and then onto the agent to manage the builder to implement the building works. The Council regains control to evaluate the building works. Multiple Council officials spoke of their frustration that the performance of others has a direct impact upon the perceived performance of the Council with the public accountability measure measure. Given that the Council has overall responsibility for adaptations and the grants, the Council would benefit from having appropriate controls in place to provide stronger oversight of the DFG process.

There is scope for the Council to strengthen its arrangements for evaluating the housing adaptations service to help it learn and improve the service

- 34 The Council inspects the housing adaptation works to ensure that they have been

completed as specified and asks the service users for their views once the adaptations work has been completed. However, our telephone survey found that 59% of service users we spoke to said that the Council had not asked for their feedback on the service provided. We also found that 48% of respondents said that the Council had not asked them if the adaptation they had received had met their needs, whilst 43% said that the Council had asked them. 9% didn't know.

- 35 Our review also found that outside the Council's Sustainable Renewal team, there was limited awareness of the Council's survey within the Council and that the results of this survey are not widely shared across the organisation, for example with Occupational Therapists and Social Services. This limits the extent to which the results are used to inform and improve the service. It would be helpful for the Council to share the survey results recognising that the service involves a range of different departments and agencies.
- 36 We also found that there is scope for the Council to improve the design and delivery of the survey so that it provides sufficient insight to help improve the service:
- Extend the range of questions in the survey to gain greater insight on service user opinion, rather than just seeking the service user's overall satisfaction. For example, the Council is missing an opportunity to learn from service user experiences by not probing the reasons for any service users' negative opinions.
 - As the duration of the application process and implementing the adaptation works can typically take 12 months – consideration should be given to the timeliness of the survey; possibly consider surveying at the completion of key stages, rather than just at the completion of the works; and
 - Ensure that the officer undertaking the satisfaction survey is independent from the DFG process, to avoid influencing the service user.

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