

County Durham Housing Group

Best practice themes

- 1. Housing association meeting cost of home adaptations for tenants out of capital monies without resort to the Disabled Facilities Grant.**
- 2. Active involvement of local occupational therapy services to determine most appropriate housing option.**

Context

County Durham Housing Group is one of the largest housing associations in the north east. The group was established in 2015 and has around 18,500 homes plus an ambitious new-build programme. The area covered by the group is diverse, stretching from former mining communities on the Durham coast, via the bustling centre of Durham city, on into remote Weardale in the north Pennines.

When the group was created, it was agreed to provide an aids and adaptations service for tenants. A dedicated budget of approximately £11m, over seven years, has been provided to deliver on that commitment. The group plans to support tenants in this way for the foreseeable future.

The adaptations service works on the principle that schemes that cost up to £10,000 are ordinarily supported. Those that could cost more are evaluated against a list of criteria within an adopted aids and adaptations policy before a decision is made. Full funding for more expensive schemes that are adopted, comes from the group's own budget and not the local authority disabled facilities grant.

In cases where the group does not support the adaptations, the tenant is still advised of their legal right to apply for an assessment through the disabled facilities grant from their local authority.

County Durham Housing Group's stance is taken against a background of significant variation across England in how the assessed needs of disabled housing association tenants are met. Some social landlords signpost their tenants to the relevant local authority for

financial assistance through the disabled facilities grant and make no contribution to those costs. Others have partnership arrangements with local authorities to share costs, although the basis for that split varies greatly.

To complement the adaptations policy the group has its own occupational therapy service. The team employs three individuals who liaise with health and care professionals, as well as the tenants themselves. The occupational therapy service concentrates on assessing housing need to move into group homes and, where required, recommends major works or minor adaptations to meet long-term need. The service also provides assessments for adaptation works not picked up by social services, where the need does not meet the threshold under the Care Act.

1. Financial support for aids and adaptations

In May 2017, County Durham Housing Group adopted an aids and adaptations policy that reflects a series of cost bands. In the case of larger works the group has a joint partnership panel. The panel features relevant senior employees and the in-house Occupational Therapy Team. It also includes representatives from the recommending OT service (Durham County Council or NHS), plus any other relevant organisations involved in the cases to be discussed. This has been a conscious decision to ensure that the interests and needs of the service user can, through the in-house and external occupational therapists, contribute to the decision-making process. The full policy is available online here:

www.countydurhamhousinggroup.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Aids-and-adaptions-policy-and-procedure-final.pdf

The majority of adaptations involving older people cost less than £10,000, but the policy specifies a process, and relevant factors of consideration, for higher scheme costs too. Importantly the option of moving home is unlikely to be actively considered for existing tenants of bungalows. They are viewed as the most adaptable homes owned by the group and that the current new-build programme includes bungalows that meet Category 1, Approved Document M Building Regulations 2010 as a minimum.

The policy for each home adaptation cost banding can be summarised as:

Minor adaptations (up to £500)

County Durham Housing Group's Aids and Adaptation Team accept referrals directly from tenants. But the team also accept referrals from Durham County Council occupational therapists; plus allied health practitioners based in the NHS; intermediate care; learning difficulties and mental health services. Works are arranged and costs met by the group, using experienced specialist contractors. There are defined target times for completion of adaptation works depending on the urgency of the case.

Major adaptations (£501 - £10,000)

Where major adaptations are recommended, the group's Adaptations and Special Projects Manager will ordinarily consider and proceed with the submitted recommendations. In complex or exceptional cases, the joint partnership panel will consider these before proceeding. The group aims to complete adaptations within 30 working days following receipt of the Occupational Therapist's recommendations.

Major adaptations (£10,001 - £30,000)

In this range, no recommendations can be agreed until they have been approved by the joint partnership panel and supported by the group. Durham County Council's Occupational Therapy Service will advise applicants at the assessment stage of the process involved.

The recommendation must be deemed reasonable and practicable; it must also meet the long-term health and wellbeing needs of the individual. All other alternatives must be explored and discussed with the individual, including alternative housing, and the provision of equipment.

Major adaptations (more than £30,000)

Large scale schemes of work in this cost range are much more likely to occur in cases involving disabled children. The arrangements would equally apply to households containing disabled older adults in very exceptional cases. Any case must be provisionally approved by the joint partnership panel. County Durham Housing Group's Adaptations Manager and Senior Occupational Therapist will prepare a report for relevant senior managers recommending either one of the options below:

Option 1 – Initial panel recommendation for works to proceed

- Proposed works
- Estimated costs
- Options that have been explored including suitable rehousing
- Exceptional circumstances.

Option 2 – Panel recommendation for works not to proceed

- Reasons why works are not deemed to be reasonable and practicable
- Options that have been explored including suitable rehousing
- Alternatives being explored, such as incentives to rehouse and care packages
- Value for Money alternatives, which could include alternative solutions to the recommended works that are more cost effective.

In these cases, there is a right of appeal.

Where a final decision is made not to authorise adaptations, County Durham Housing Group will still work with the relevant occupational therapy service, the tenant, carer and/or their appointed representative to look for alternative solutions to meet their needs. Solutions could include:

- Rehousing
- A direct let can be requested at the discretion of the landlord
- An alternative scheme of adaptations
- Tenants may also have the option to request permission to make alterations themselves.

2. Working with occupational therapists and tenants

The aids and adaptation policy was developed jointly by County Durham Housing Group with the occupational therapy services from Durham County Council and the NHS. This joint approach has ensured active involvement at all stages of the assessment process, including consideration of housing options. The group's occupational therapists liaise with their professional counterparts in Durham County Council and the NHS as the interface between meeting need, and asset management considerations.

County Durham Housing Group provides a monthly performance report on completions to keep the occupational therapy service updated.

The group recognises the need to capture tenants' views more effectively on existing and future adaptation service developments. This is being undertaken through the use of customer focus groups on adaptation service design. There is also an aspiration to improve the efficiency of the adaptation in respect of personal outcomes. To move forward there has been some early stage work on establishing a group of housing associations to examine best practice and benchmark in this area.

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