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## Case Study 155

# A strengths based approach to delivering the Disabled Facilities Grant – Thurrock Council

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# Summary

An accessible and well-adapted home can enable an adult or child with a disability to remain in their home for longer, with dignity and with pride, and the earlier this is achieved, the sooner the benefits can be realised. Such benefits have long been recognised in Thurrock, and with the Care Act 2014 shifting the focus to a more preventative approach to supporting people, the preventative benefits of accessible home adaptations were also anticipated.

This case study outlines how Thurrock Council have adopted a strength based approach to delivering Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) to enhance individual's independence and provide overall improvements to their health and wellbeing. This approach shares the virtues set out in the Royal College of Occupational Therapists' recent guide, *Adaptations without delay: A guide to planning and delivering home adaptations differently*.

## What it seeks to achieve

Home adaptations can provide many benefits for individuals, with the smallest change to an individual's home bringing about significant enhancements to the individual's independence; and overall health and wellbeing. Home adaptations can also reduce the risks associated with a poorly accessible home; reduce the risk of falls, hospital admissions, and reduce the need for the reliance on carers, or other informal and formal support such as residential care.

As highlighted in the Royal College of Occupational Therapists' recent guide, *Adaptations without delay: A guide to planning and delivering home adaptations differently*<sup>1</sup>, an accessible and well-adapted home can enable an adult or child with a disability to remain in their home for longer, with dignity and with pride, and the earlier this is achieved, the sooner the benefits can be realised.

Such benefits have long been recognised in Thurrock, and with the Care Act 2014 shifting the focus to a more preventative approach to supporting people, the preventative benefits of accessible home adaptations were also anticipated.

In 2016, a Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) report<sup>2</sup> drew greater attention to the frequent challenges local residents experienced in accessing and navigating the DFG service, which appeared to be a common theme nationally.

A "root and branch" review was initiated to consider the findings of the LGO report, and explore how the DFG service could be delivered differently. This root and branch review would be undertaken in the context of the overall transformation of health and care services in Thurrock, with a focus on a strengths based approach, moving away from needs and defects and with a far greater emphasis upon empowering users and families and upon prevention whenever possible.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Adaptations-Without-Delay/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.lgo.org.uk/information-centre/news/2016/mar/delays-to-disabled-facilities-grant-process-have-major-impact-on-people-s-lives-says-ombudsman>

As explained in the section below, a number of key principles were considered during the review; in particular, using an approach that provided the greatest opportunity for choice and control for the applicant. The customer journey was also paramount, whereby the applicant would be able to better access the DFG, and for works to be completed as soon as possible.

## Outcomes for DFG applicants

### **A strength based approach**

In keeping with the principles of a strength based approach, the strengths of the applicant were considered throughout. A soft market exercise was undertaken to consider various service delivery models, and in particular, how the grant “agent” was defined, and the benefits and barriers to each option.

3 primary service models were reviewed, the first whereby the Council retained the status of the grant “agent”, which was the service model and approach adopted at the time of the review.

The first approach recognised the Council retains control of all works and acts as an “agent” on behalf of the applicant. While the rationale and benefits of the approach were recognised, it was not considered to fully acknowledge the applicant’s ability to engage in the DFG journey, or enable the applicant to have as much choice or control on who, or how the works would be progressed.

This model which was in use at the time also included an element of support from a Home Improvement Agency (HIA); in the form of supporting applicants in completing the DFG application. Similarly, the rationale and benefits of the approach were recognised, but again it was believed potential applicants could do more for themselves, or get support from friends, family or the community.

The initial phase of the process and hand offs between HIA and the Council was identified as “pinch points” for delays; and as such opportunities to complete the application quicker were considered, including opportunities whereby the applicant could complete this themselves, or with people they would be familiar or feel comfortable with.

The second model considered was one where the HIA would act as the applicants “agent” in its entirety, and while a strengths based approach may further be supported than previously, and hand offs reduced, it was still agreed by all that we could go further and provide the applicant with greater opportunities.

The third, and final, model and approach considered was one where the applicant would be the “agent” themselves, whilst not the most common approach adopted by others, this was the preferred option. It was felt that this option recognised and achieved a truly strengths based approach, dispelling the myth that people needed the level of support they had previously had provided.

In this model, the Council would encourage and support the potential applicant to “self serve” and progress the initial application, and return the forms to initiate the application sooner.

On successful application, the applicant is able to engage with contractors / suppliers of choice, obtain the relevant quotations to progress the application to “grant approval”. The applicant is provided with an “approved amount”, which is the quote that is satisfactory to meeting the identified need and the OT specification, as well as providing best value. Where all quotations satisfy the identified need and the OT specification, the applicant is able to choose which builder or supplier to use, and should they wish to self-fund the difference, they are able to instruct the builder of choice. With control of the resource, applicants are able to monitor the works undertaken and complete the financial transaction upon completion of the works.

The approach provided wider benefits to all potential applicants, providing VAT exemption (where appropriate) and the process was less resource intensive, providing the opportunity to maximise the use of available resource within the DFG allocated funding.

Where the applicant is unable, unwilling or the option is restricted; for example, the supply and installation of ceiling track hoists to ensure compliance with the relevant moving and handling regulations; the “agent responsibility” for works undertaken would be recognised as that of the Council, and a more traditional approach would be available and adopted. To date, and in over 2 years, no applicant has voluntarily opted for this approach.

## **The customer journey**

A full review of the customer journey and previous procedures had been undertaken, and was inclusive of the whole journey from the initial contact into Adult Social Care (ASC), to the completion of the home adaptation.

A focus on identifying the “pinch points” in the customer journey enabled us to explore solutions that would be quicker, provide opportunities to utilise the applicant’s strengths and own resources, and deliver greater control.

A review and redesign of ASC had previously been undertaken, and subsequent access to the DFG enhanced with a number of initiatives such as a self-assessment, implemented to reduce initial delays in Occupational Therapy assessments to less than 8 weeks. This ensured qualified practitioners, with the most appropriate skills and experience, were utilised for when they were needed.

Nonetheless, further consideration was given to improving the customer journey within DFG services, with the aim to reduce the number of “hand offs” and the associated barriers these presented to potential applicants accessing the grant.

The DFG service was integrated with ASC Occupational Therapy Services, providing a single, person centred and outcome focused assessment approach to identifying and realising the most appropriate solution. The commonly perceived barrier between ASC and Housing services in accessing the grant were eradicated, the DFG panel removed, with ASC practitioners and DFG administrators working closely together in one service. In turn each professional was trusted and empowered to identify and approve the most appropriate solution, while ensuring the applicant was fully engaged and aware of the progress throughout.

Integration also improved awareness of the grant much earlier in conversations with the potential applicant, in keeping with the Care Act's greater emphasis on prevent, reduce and delay, created opportunities for the preventative benefits of the DFG to be fully realised.

The self-serve model to applications and administration eliminated the need for "hand offs" between a range of agencies and services, such as the HIA and technical support services. Traditionally, all applications would follow this process, in many cases, this had shown itself to be unnecessary.

This approach "uncomplicated" the journey significantly and further sped up the process to improve the response times and support quicker access to the home adaptation.

A draft policy was written to reflect the chosen service model, and a full process map of the customer journey had been created with internal service procedures formalised.

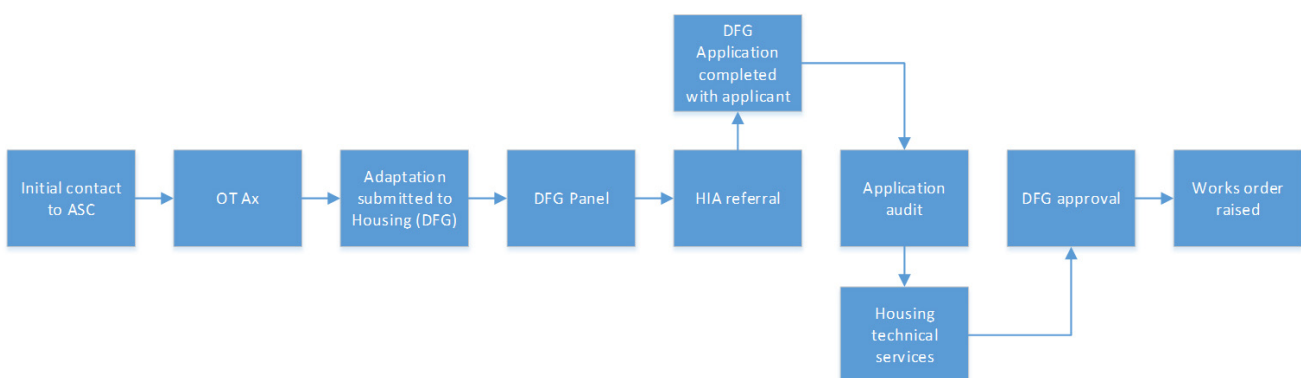
A dedicated DFG Officer was appointed and this provided greater ease of access to support for the applicant in the form of information and advice where the applicant is their own agent, or access to support from the relevant agency when the Council is acting as the applicant's agent. The role of the DFG officer shifted from a more administrative function, to one of facilitation that supported the applicant to engage and take control of the grant.

Recently, an additional 0.5 FTE DFG officer has been recruited; despite this, the resources needed to deliver the service has been significantly reduced. With a streamlined and self serve approach realised, greater resource was available to deliver home adaptations. "Specialisms", such as technical services, were only accessed where needed, and fees applied to the grant. Discretionary grants were offered to cover those where the maximum grant had been exceeded.

Since adopting the new approach, the number of completed cases and spend has doubled since 2016, but despite this, we continue to bring down the overall time from the DFG initiating to works being completed.

The difference between the "old" and the "new" customer journey is illustrated below:

### **Old ways**



## New route



## Conclusion (what we learnt)

Applicants can do more from themselves; supporting a strengths based and “self serve” approach provides significant benefits for the applicant and the service.

For the applicant, they have greater sight and ownership of many parts of the whole customer journey. The applicant has greater influence on progressing the application and the works, greater control on who undertakes the works, and when and how works progress. The applicant has more choices in regards to the end design, with the only requirement being that the outcome for which the DFG is awarded is achieved, and best value is satisfied.

For the service, there are less procurement and contract management resources needed with the self serve approach. The nature of support for the applicant changes and is less resource intensive also, with the relationship between the applicant and service shifting to a more neutral and shared responsibility to achieve the desired outcome.

The strengths based approach also helped us to focus, and challenge our thinking about who would be the best person to support the applicant at different times of the journey. Direct contact with one service, and only using specialist skills and knowledge when absolutely needed has proven beneficial. The need for technical support, for example, is only used when needed, as many of the works didn’t need such expertise. The applicant would effectively raise the order themselves, therefore the service resources are significantly reduced and timeframes for delivery of the home adaptation improved.

It is a common view that traditional service delivery models are too complicated and too cumbersome, and this was recognised very early in the review, with multiple “hand offs” between services and agencies evident. With a shift in approach to self-serve, and support given only where required, previous “hand offs” in the journey were removed, with the applicant only needing to engage direct with the DFG service throughout the customer journey.

The number of completed cases and overall spend has doubled since 2016, but despite this, the overall time for progressing the DFG application to works being completed has continued to fall, and “pinch points” for delays no longer sit within the DFG service itself.

Evidence of the effectiveness of the new approach can be seen from the high number of compliments and general “thankyou’s” received by the DFG service. Since the new approach was introduced, applicants have not only accepted it, but welcomed it. Although the DFG officers occasionally visit and assist applicants with the application forms, they do not often get asked for this type of assistance. This has shown that the Thurrock DFG approach has been effective, and can be achieved. Older and / or disabled people want to have “Choice and Control”, and the success of our approach has provided evidence that this is the case.

Whole system changes can present challenges, so the key principles were identified and become the focus of every element of scrutiny and decision making. A “think big...start small” approach was taken, and elements of the customer journey reviewed one step at a time.

There were repeated concerns raised initially from some community members, and staff, suggesting potential applicants would not be able to “self serve” and be their own “agent”. “Buy in” from the senior leadership team and key stakeholders; a change in management and a belief in a new approach that provided support, gave confidence and empowered applicants and staff to support change within the service.

With effective information, step by step guidance and support from a DFG officer available to the applicant throughout, we have been able to alleviate the concerns initially raised outside the service. We also ensured an alternative approach was available, but despite this, our greatest success is that we have not been requested to act as the applicant’s “agent” in over 2 years.

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

For more about Thurrock Council’s home adaptations and equipment service, go to:  
<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/home-adaptations-and-equipment/overview>



# About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 25,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by Government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

For further information about the Housing LIN and to access a comprehensive list of online resources for Occupational Therapists, visit our dedicated pages at:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Design-building/occupational-therapy/>

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