

# Housing for Disabled Children and Families

Quick Guide

May 2012

## Introduction

One of the Welsh Government's **seven core aims** of working with children is that they should have a **safe home** and a community which **supports physical and emotional wellbeing**. For a disabled child their home can provide the **most restrictive environment** they experience. One report estimated that **nine out of ten families** with disabled children have problems with housing<sup>1</sup>. The problems they face, relevant housing policies and the grants available for housing adaptations are summarised in this Quick Guide.

## What are the issues?

Due to medical advances and provision of community health services there are **more children with complex needs** living with their families. The housing needs of disabled children can differ from those of disabled adults. They may **change as children develop**, requiring **on-going assessment and support**. Attending to the care needs of a disabled child can become increasingly difficult as they grow and there may be **safety implications** for both the child and their carers of living in an unsuitable property.

Grants are available to fund improvements but local authorities must ensure that the most **cost-effective and appropriate** solution is provided to meet a child's needs. **Internal adaptations** must always be considered before approving a home extension. A family may be **advised to move** when **suitable access** cannot be provided or where the **condition of the property** may make adaptations **unaffordable or impractical**.

Housing adaptations can have a **positive impact on health and safety** of carers and children, e.g. by installing equipment to assist with manual handling. Adaptations can also be made to the exterior of a property such as providing a **safe outdoor play space**.

## What are the Welsh Government's policies?

The **National Service Framework** for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (NSF) sets out **three key actions** on housing for disabled children<sup>2</sup>. Local authorities are **required to provide clear information** to families and carers about what **assistance, support and grants** are available. Another key action requires local authorities to **maintain a register of adapted properties** so that families can be matched with a suitable property if they need to move. In a

<sup>1</sup> Dept. of Health, *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, 20 January 2005 [accessed 9 May 2012]

<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government, *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*, p49-50 [accessed 8 May 2012]

2009 survey<sup>3</sup> ten local authorities in Wales had developed some form of **accessible housing register** and another eight were intending to introduce one.

The **Welsh Housing Quality Standard** requires all social landlords to bring their housing stock up to an acceptable level and each house should, as far as possible, **meet the specific requirements of the household**, including disabled members<sup>4</sup>. All Welsh Government funded housing developments must incorporate **Lifetime Home Standards**<sup>5</sup> into dwellings wherever possible as a **condition of funding**.

## What grants are available to home-owners?

A **Disabled Facilities Grant** (DFG) is available from local authorities to pay for housing adaptations. Entitlement is mandatory **subject to assessment and approval**<sup>6</sup>. The maximum grant available in Wales was **£36,000** for 2011-12. There is **no means-testing for parents of disabled children under 19**. Local authorities also have the **discretion to pay top-up costs** for major works over the maximum limit and can also **fast track applications for minor adaptations** and pay for them without using a DFG<sup>7</sup>.

**Owner-occupiers** can apply to their local council for a DFG. In addition to a child's parents, **relatives and foster carers**<sup>8</sup> **who are caring for a disabled child** may be eligible if their home is the child's full-time residence. Shared parenting arrangements can be considered according to individual circumstances. Carers of disabled children who own part of the equity in their property under a **shared ownership scheme** are also entitled to a DFG. In all cases children must live at the address for **five years from the certified date of completion**.

The DFG application and approval process involves different council departments. A **social services** occupational therapist must assess any works that are **'necessary and appropriate'** to **meet the child's needs** and **increase their independence**. The **housing grants department** must be satisfied that it is **'reasonable and practical'** to carry out the recommended works, taking into account the age and condition of the property.

**New private housing developments** have to conform to certain standards on accessibility. **Part M of the Building Regulations** requires all new homes to have safe and convenient access with an entrance level WC and electrical switches and sockets within easy reach. Any further adaptations should be **less expensive** to provide if Part M standards have been met.<sup>9</sup>

## What grants are available to tenants?

People living in housing provided by **local authorities, registered social landlords (RSLs) or private landlords** can apply for a DFG. Adaptations for RSL tenants are usually funded by a Welsh Government **Physical Adaptations Grant**

<sup>3</sup> Disability Wales, **Accessible Housing, Looking for an accessible home: Accessible Housing Registers in Wales** [accessed 9 May 2012]

<sup>4</sup> Welsh Government, **Revised Guidance for Social Landlords on Interpretation and Achievement of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard**, 8 December 2009 [accessed 9 May 2012]

<sup>5</sup> The Lifetime Homes Standards were developed in the 1990s and consist of sixteen design criteria to be incorporated into new homes and housing renovations so that housing can be more easily adapted to the changing needs of individuals and families at different stages in their lives.

<sup>6</sup> **Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996**

<sup>7</sup> **The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002**

<sup>8</sup> The type and length of a fostering placement will be taken into consideration.

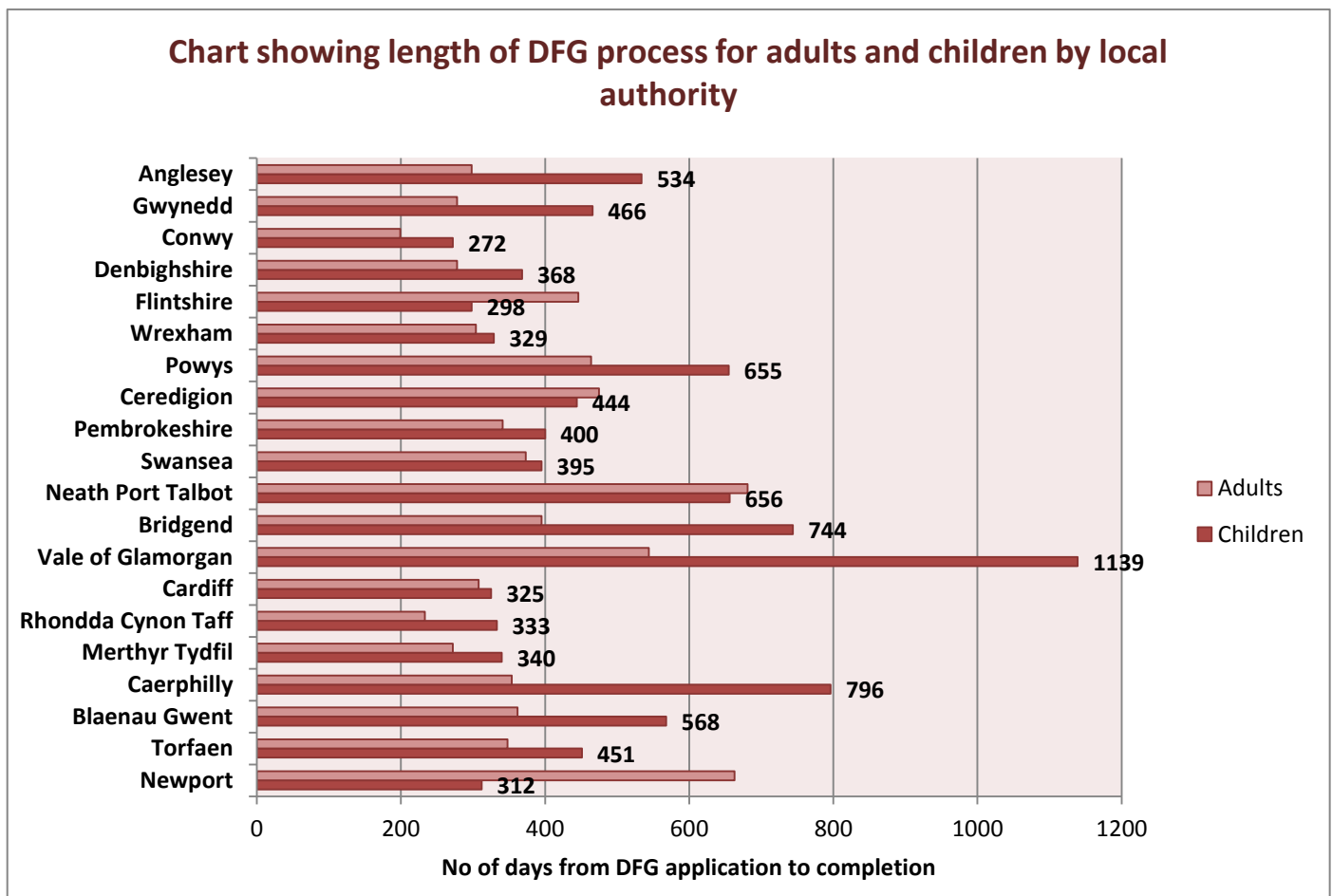
<sup>9</sup> Responsibility for Building Regulations has been devolved to Welsh Ministers from 1 January 2012.

(PAG). Tenants can apply to their local council for a DFG, (or their landlord in the case of a PAG), who can arrange any required work following assessment by an **occupational therapist**. Where work is not considered reasonable or practical the tenant can be **assisted to move** to a more suitable property.

DFGs and PAGs are **not available** to people living in **short-term or temporary housing**.

## How long does the DFG process take from application to completion?

Figures for the average length of the DFG process in each Welsh local authority **distinguishing** between applications for children and adults were published for the first time for the year 2010-11. The chart below illustrates the comparison with figures for DFGs for both children and adults shown:



Source: Infobase Cymru

The **average number of days** for DFGs to be delivered was **386 for adults and 478 for children**. There was a **larger variation** between local authorities for the process of **applications for children** to be completed (272 to 1,139 days) compared to adults (199 to 681 days). The majority of local authorities took longer to complete applications for children. **No figures** were provided for Carmarthenshire or Monmouthshire.

**Joint working arrangements** between the social services and housing departments are seen as **key to delivering a good quality service** and one report has suggested that the **co-ordination of advice and support** between these

departments can speed up the process<sup>10</sup>. However the performance indicator for DFGs **does not include information on different stages** of the process. There is no information on the proportion of **more complex applications** in each local authority. DFG requests can range from installing a stair lift to a two-storey extension. Where major work is recommended officers from other local authority departments such as **planning and building control** may be involved, potentially adding considerably more time to the approval process.

## What happens if a DFG application is refused?

Councils have a **statutory requirement to notify applicants within six months of the application being made**. If the application is **refused** the reasons must be given in writing<sup>11</sup>. Applicants have the **right to appeal** using their local authority's complaints procedure. If the applicant is dissatisfied with the local authority's response they can contact the **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales**.

## Further information

For further information on Housing for Disabled Children and Families, please contact **Jonathan Baxter** ([Jonathan.Baxter@Wales.gov.uk](mailto:Jonathan.Baxter@Wales.gov.uk)), Research Service.

### See also:

- Contact a Family/Shelter Cymru, ***Family experiences of accessing Disabled Facilities Grants: A collaborative research study in Wales and Northern Ireland***, November 2008 [accessed 9 May 2012]
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation, ***Housing for disabled children and their families: An information resource***, 15 May 2009 [accessed 9 May 2012]

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**Enquiry no: 12/0233**

**Lynette Hayward**

<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government, ***Review of Housing Adaptations including Disabled Facilities Grants - Wales*** 1 March 2005 [accessed 9 May 2012]

<sup>11</sup> ***Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996***, S.34