

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
Inquiry into Home Adaptations

Response from : The Royal British Legion



**Legion submission to the Communities, Equality
and Local Government Committee - Inquiry into
home adaptations**

February 2013

The Royal British Legion (the Legion) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into home adaptations in Wales. A significant amount of welfare work in Wales relates to home adaptations and Disabled Facilities Grants in particular and we welcome any work to improve the system. We have produced this submission at very short notice and would welcome the opportunity to expand upon our contribution at the oral sessions.

The Legion aims to be the number one provider of welfare, comradeship, representation and Remembrance for the Armed Forces community. We are one of the UK's largest membership organisations and provide financial, social and emotional support to millions who have Served and are currently serving in the Armed Forces, and their dependants. The Legion is the largest welfare provider in the Armed Forces and veterans charity sector. In 2011/12 the Legion delivered over 160,000 welfare intervention services and spent on average, £1.4m per week on its welfare work.

Disabled Facilities Grants

We would like to begin by highlighting the critical role home adaptations, primarily funded by Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), play in enabling independent living for many veterans, old and young, and their dependants. These statutory grants provide vital facilities and adaptations such as stairlifts, level access showers and widened doors for wheelchairs. Despite being a fairly modest area of expenditure they provide a low-cost but dramatic improvement in the quality of life of many of our beneficiaries.

In many areas of the country the demand for DFGs already outstrips the available resources meaning some local authorities fail to meet their statutory obligations. This means that in many cases veterans, and others, are forced to wait years for essential adaptations.

It is not uncommon for a veteran, no longer able to use his bath, to be made to wait two years or more for a level access shower. All the while they are forced to strip wash at their kitchen sink, undermining their confidence, dignity and ability to remain living at home. As well as failing to protect the most vulnerable in society this can result in higher longer-term costs for social care and health.

All too often local authorities fail to meet their statutory obligations with DFGs, failing to process applications within legal time limits or denying assistance through the use of inappropriate and unlawful priority systems. To address this we have introduced a robust case management procedure to monitor the progress of a beneficiary's application. The application is monitored to ensure the statutory time limits are met and appropriate decisions made on entitlements. Where local authorities still fail to meet their duties will often, to avoid prolonged discomfort, fund adaptations. Whilst the Legion is here to assist our beneficiaries it is not appropriate for charities to be fulfilling local authority duties.

Legion experience:

- Some local authorities have significantly improved their administration and delivery of DFGs over the last few years.
- There is still inconsistency between local authorities particularly in regards to time taken to assess and process applications. Some authorities are processing applications within the statutory six months whilst others take far longer.
- Individual local authorities can be inconsistent in their approach to applicants – with the service and information provided and decisions made on applications. This creates confusion and uncertainty for our beneficiaries and partner organisations.

Inquiry Questions

What impact reduced resources for housing are likely to have on the provision of home adaptations?

A reduction in resources for housing is likely to result in both local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL) reducing their funding commitment to DFGs and home adaptations. This will have a detrimental impact on the lives of those directly affected and is likely to result in increased NHS and social services demand and expenditure.

Provision of adaptations can reduce wider state costs by cutting calls on the health service (eg. falls, hip fractures, and delayed discharge), reducing social care expenditure and enabling independent living for longer¹.

It is estimated that falls by older people in the UK cost over £1 billion annually². A hip-fracture can cost £30,000³. Falls and fractures are greatly reduced by the provision of home adaptations, such as stair lifts and level access showers.

What more needs to be done to improve home adaptations services in Wales?

The Legion believes that an individual requiring an adaptation as a result of an injury or condition incurred through Service in the Armed Forces should not be expected to contribute towards the cost. Currently such individuals can be required to pay towards the cost of work to enable them to live independently.

The Legion was recently informed of an individual who was severely injured whilst serving in the Armed Forces and as a result now requires an electric wheelchair. This necessitated adaptation of his home. He received a DFG but, due to his wife's earnings, was required to contribute several thousand pounds towards the cost of the work. He felt this a dis-service to someone who had put his life on the line for the nation.

The Legion believes that this fails to honour the the Armed Forces Covenant. The current rules do not provide sufficient respect for the contribution injured veterans have made to the nation; nor does it satisfy the lifelong duty of care that the Government holds towards such individuals.

¹ Heywood, F and Turner (2007) *Better Outcomes, Lower Costs: implications for health and social care budgets of investment in housing adaptations, improvements and equipment: A review of the evidence* Office for Disability Issues.

² Scuffham, P, Chaplin, S and Legodd, R (2003) 'Incidence and costs of unintentional falls in older people in the UK' *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 57 740-744. Price adjusted to 2009 levels in line with ONS inflation statistics.

³ Parrott, S (2000) *The economic cost of hip fracture in the UK* York: University of York

³ ODPM ((2005) *Reviewing the disabled facilities grant*: 21 (cost adjusted to 2009).

The Legion believes that in line with the Covenant principle, special treatment should be provided to injured personnel by exempting from means testing those requiring an adaptation as a result of a Service related injury.

Since 2009 War Pension at 80% or higher and Constant Attendance Allowance and AFCS lump sum payment and Guaranteed Income Payments at tariffs 1-6 are disregarded when means testing for DFGs. Whilst this is welcome we believe that veterans requiring adaptations as a result of a Service injury or illness should not be expected to make any contribution towards home adaptations required for a Service related injury.