



## When is a House not a Home?

### Bureau Local's Disabled Facilities Grant investigation

*NB: This is a live document and we will add in key quotes from experts and any other resources or assets that can be freely used once these are available. When using this data in a story or project, please credit and link to the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#). Feel free to contact our reporters with any questions at [healthinequality@tbij.com](mailto:healthinequality@tbij.com).*

We ask everyone who joins the reporting to stick to an embargo time of 00:01 on the day. We will give you as much notice of that embargo as possible - likely to be around a week before.

We will share our national story and local coverage on Twitter ([@bureaulocal](#)) using the hashtag #DisablingHomes.

#### **This document contains the following sections:**

- [Overview and findings](#)
- [Accessing and understanding the data](#)
- [Context and background](#)
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#### **Overview and findings**

Thousands of disabled people across the UK are waiting months just to be assessed for an adaptation to their home, and years to get the work done. These waits can result in terrible hardship — lack of cooking or showering — or even people being unable to live in their own home until it can be made accessible. One way of funding these crucial adaptations is by applying for a means-tested Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG).

Bureau Local can reveal:

*Time taken for Northern Ireland Housing Executive's part of the DFG process*

- Disabled residents in the private housing sector whose adaptations were completed in 2020/21, and the first seven months of 2021/22 (up to 31 October 2021), had waited **more than three years on average for them to be finished.**
- In **2020/21 applicants faced waits of three years or more** in: Ards and North Down (38 months/ 3.2 years), Causeway Coast and Glens (36 months/ 3 years), Lisburn and Castlereagh (44 months/ 3.7 years) and Newry Mourne and Down (38 months/ 3.2 years) - and **in 2021/22**, Ards and North Down (40 months/ 3.3 years), and Newry Mourne and Down (40 months/ 3.3 years).

In each financial year we calculated the median average wait between councils.

2018/19 - 19 months

2019/20 - 17 months

2020/21 - 32 months

2021/22 (up to 31 October 2021) - 26 months

- The council areas where **wait times were above the average in all four years** are: Newry Mourne and Down, Lisburn and Castlereagh, Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon and Ards and North Down.

#### *Time taken between an application being approved and the grant completed*

- Disabled residents in the private housing sector **waited between nine and 20 months** on average for home adaptations to be completed once they'd received an 'approval of application' from the Housing Executive in 2020/21, depending on where they live.
- In 2021/22, this increased to 21 months in Ards and North Down, where residents are experiencing waits that have gone up by eight months since the year before.

#### *No. of applicants who drop out after the means test*

- 15% of private sector households dropped out of the grant application process for home adaptations after a means test, during a three-and-a-half year period, from April 2018 to October 2021.
- The percentage of drop-outs has increased each year since 2018/19 from 7% to 25% in 2021/22.
- In Mid and East Antrim, and Antrim and Newtownabbey, more than half of applicants drop out after the means test in both 2020/21 and 2021/22.
- In 2020/21, 50% fewer households' means tests were completed compared to 2019/20.

### *Housing tenure inequality*

- Of the total number of DFGs approved for the two-and-a-half years between April 2019 and October 2021, 89% were for owner-occupiers versus 11% for the private rented sector across Northern Ireland.
- Under each council area, the number of DFG applications approved for owner-occupiers far outstrips that for the private rented sector in the same period.

### *Grants completed*

- The number of grants completed went down 6% in 2019/20 from the year before, but since then has decreased by 26% in 2020/21.

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## **Accessing and understanding the data**

### Methodology

In November 2021, we submitted a Freedom of Information request to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to obtain this data, covering the 2018/19 tax year to 2021/22 until 31 October 2021, about Disabled Facilities Grants. The data returned to us relates to individuals in the private rented sector and owner-occupiers.

Below we will outline what information you can establish from each tab of the Northern Ireland workbook with key data notes.

- **Access the full dataset** [here](#)
- **You might want to download the dataset to an Excel spreadsheet to allow you to filter it. If you are unfamiliar with how to filter results, find instructions** [here](#).

### What the data says

**NB:** You should avoid comparing OT referrals received and/or applications received against the grants completed in any given year because an application could have been lodged in one financial year and completed in another. Please email the team if you would like further clarity.

### *Waits analysis*

In its response to our FOI, the Housing Executive said it only initiates a Disabled Facilities Grant once it receives a recommendation from a Health and Social Care Trust's occupational therapist. Therefore, the waiting time data the Bureau has begins at the point a person's application is referred to the Housing Executive until completion (questions 2c, 2d and 2e in our FOI).

A detailed breakdown of the process can be found in the NIHE's response to our findings and [here](#) on its website, broken down by housing tenure.

- ➔ Columns C, D and E give you the median average number of calendar days to complete each step of the process as provided by the NIHE.
- ➔ Column F gives you our calculated total time in weeks. Column G gives you our calculated total time in months.
- ➔ Column H gives you the national median average waiting time in each given financial year and from Column I, you can tell whether the wait time for your council in each given year is above (TRUE) or below (FALSE) that average. E.g. Under Antrim and Newtownabbey council area in 2018/19, does the 13.6 month wait go above the national average 19 month wait? No, indicated by 'FALSE' in Column I.

#### **Data notes**

- The NIHE provided median calendar days that we have converted into weeks, months and years.
- Given they are averages, it means these waiting times are indicative and applicants are likely to have been waiting longer.

#### *Number of grants and total expenditure*

- ➔ From Columns D and E, you can work out the percentage of potential applicants that dropped out of the DFG process for individual council areas each year.
  - ➔ We have also provided you with additional data, including the total DFG expenditure per year in Column I.
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## **Context and Background**

### Why are we investigating home adaptations?

There are more than 14 million disabled people in the UK — 8% of children are disabled, 19% of working-age adults are disabled, and 46% of pension-age adults, according to [Scope](#). Almost one in five people are disabled in Northern Ireland.

Disability charity Contact's [2021 Counting the Costs survey](#) found that more than a quarter (27%) of UK families with disabled children say their home makes their child's condition worse or puts them at risk. Chief executive, Amanda Batten, said: "We hear from parents having to carry teenagers up and down steep staircases, at great risk to themselves and their child. We know of young people having to use a commode toilet in kitchens, or sleep in dining rooms or living rooms, due to unsuitable accommodation."

Disabled people who have their accessible housing needs met are [four times more likely](#) to be in employment than disabled people without accessible homes. Despite this, it is not a legal requirement for new homes in the UK to be accessible and adaptable or fully accessible for wheelchair users. (Read more about M4(2) and M4(3) standards in the Raising accessibility standards for new homes consultation report [here](#))

Home is where many disabled and chronically unwell people spend the majority of their time. Adaptations ensure they can comfortably use, and get in and around the space; gives them independence, and can be what makes their property feel like a home. Sadly, some people with degenerative conditions like Motor Neurone Disease might not live long enough to experience their homes being adapted.

The Bureau became aware of families facing lengthy waits to get these vital works and noticed a pattern of crowdfunding to cover the costs that Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) could not. We set out to uncover the full extent of people's waits — from being assessed by an occupational therapist to the grant being completed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive — and to what extent access to DFG funding, and the length of time of the entire process, is a postcode lottery.

We also sought to update national estimates of how many applicants drop out of the DFG process as a result of being means tested as well as other key data on DFG delivery, such as the number of referrals from occupational therapists, grants approved and completed.

### What are Disabled Facilities Grants?

A [Disabled Facilities Grant](#) (DFG) is a mandatory grant for home adaptations that was first introduced in 1989. 'Mandatory' in this case means "it is a legal requirement for local authorities to provide help to people who meet the eligibility criteria, whether or not the authority has sufficient budget". (Source [here](#)).

In Northern Ireland it is available only for private rented tenants and landlords, or those who own their own home. The grant is administered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE).

Typically the first step in the DFG process in Northern Ireland is an assessment from an occupational therapist, who will go to someone's home to evaluate their needs. That will be through a Health and Social Services Trust, a GP or a social worker. The DFG is means-tested for everyone aged 19 and over.

No work can take place until an Approval of Application has been issued by the Housing Executive, which could take up to six months to receive, the NIHE says online. This is a statutory deadline. Another of its online guides states that once approval has been given, the work should then start within eight weeks and finish within 12 months.

The statutory maximum amount an applicant can receive as a DFG is £25,000, although the NIHE can choose to provide payments above that amount under the existing grants policy under the Housing (NI) Order 2003.

- A detailed breakdown of the process can be found in the NIHE's response to our findings and [here](#) on its website.
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## **Comments and individual stories**

We have approached the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to respond to the national findings. If you would like insight on individual council areas, please go back to the NIHE and not individual councils.

You will find all NI resources and responses in [this Google drive folder](#) including the original FOI request.

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## **How can I get involved in my area?**

To write a local story for your area, we suggest you take the following steps:

- Sign up to our Bureau Local Slack channel (instructions [here](#)), where we have set up a special channel for this investigation to help you with your reporting. Please also join our Bureau Local network [here](#).
- Speak to Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), Independent Living Centres, or charities working with either disabled or older people, families with children disabled children, or campaigning for people with specific conditions like Motor Neurone Disease to find out about people's direct experiences of the issues in your area.

- Can you find disability activists or influencers in your area, who might have their own experiences? Or an occupational therapist to explain more about the role in relation to assessing people's needs?
  - Speak to your councillors about the findings and also your local MP or parliamentarian.
  - Share our [video callout](#) for people to share their experiences of living in a property that does not meet their needs.
  - If you publish a story, you can include our [summary of information](#) on how people can access DFGs — one of the problems with the system is how few people are aware it exists and they are eligible.
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## Useful guides and contacts

The following organisations might be able to help with interviewees or insight, and more are listed [here](#):

[Age UK NI](#)

[Autism Network NI](#)

[Cedar Foundation](#)

[Centre for Independent Living NI](#)

[Contact - for Families with Disabled Children](#)

[Clanrye Group](#)

[Disability Action NI](#)

[Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)

[Habinteg - Ulster](#)

[Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee \(IMTAC\)](#)

[Jigsaw NI](#)

[Landlords Association for Northern Ireland \(LANI\)](#)

[Leonard Cheshire NI](#)

[Motor Neurone Disease Association NI](#)

[National Autistic Society NI](#)

[North West Forum of People with Disability](#)

[Positive Futures NI](#)

[Renters' Voice for private tenants](#)

Useful references:

[Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 50th annual report 2020/21](#)

[UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2016 inquiry – UK 2021 follow-up report](#)

[The National Disability Strategy, 2021](#) (P14 - “The Northern Ireland Executive is in the process of developing a strategy specific to the needs of people in Northern Ireland.”)  
[Minister is urged to increase grant for upgrades to homes of disabled people, 2021](#)  
[ITV - Housing crisis for disabled people set to deepen, 2021](#)