

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
COMMUNITIES and HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

25 July 2016

Report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Council Decision

1 REVIEW OF HOUSING ASSISTANCE POLICY

Summary

This report informs Members on the outcomes of the Housing Assistance Policy and Disabled Facilities Grants and seeks approval on amendments to both policies.

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Members may recall that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the Council's Housing Assistance Policy in January 2014, as a result of changing demand and financial constraint. Following the review, a new Policy and budget was agreed for the two year period 2014/16.
- 1.1.2 Following the review, a carefully designed and targeted assistance programme was established with the aim of ensuring homes are warm, safe and healthy for some of our most vulnerable residents. The programme has focused on small scale works of repair to mitigate a serious hazard that will adversely affect the health and or safety of the applicant.
- 1.1.3 The budget provision was set at £90,000, of which £60,000 was to be met from the Council' own resources and £30,000 by way of grant repayments.
- 1.1.4 A reserve fund was created of £150,000 to accommodate any shortfall from repaid grants. Any annual underspend would be transferred to the Housing Assistance Reserve and the reserve balance capped at £200,000. The reserve balance as at 1 April 2016 stands at £200,000.
- 1.1.5 Over the duration of the Policy average expenditure has been £60,000 and a total of 26 vulnerable households have been assisted with the following outcomes achieved:

Outcomes	Number of Interventions
More warm/energy efficient homes	11
The home is more secure	5
Victims of Domestic Abuse were safely able to remain in their own home	13

*Please note, one case may cover more than one outcome.

1.2 Revisions to the Housing Assistance Policy 2016/2020

1.2.1 The Housing Assistance Policy has worked well over the last two years, helping vulnerable households most in need to remain living safely, warmly and independently in their own homes. Without this intervention some vulnerable households would be left at risk. This is against a backdrop of very little promotion of the Policy.

1.2.2 A robust review of the Policy has again been undertaken to ensure corporate priorities continue to be met and budgetary pressures reflected.

1.2.3 There are two areas of the Policy that are proposed for amendment. One is on eligibility criteria and the other is the level of budget which is covered in section 1.6. The first amendment is the criteria for accessing help with improving heating and insulation through our Warm Homes Assistance. Currently, the eligibility criteria is that an applicant must be in receipt of a means tested benefit or in an area we are targeting for energy improvements or be a private sector landlord who is working with the Council in accepting nominated tenants. We propose to extend the eligibility criteria to include the following:

- Owner occupier over 65 years of age, living in a cold home who has one of the following medical conditions: cardiovascular, respiratory, pulmonary, mental health, disability, multiple long term conditions (including cancer) as confirmed by their health or social care professional, OR
- Owner occupier (or partner) living in a cold home and they have a serious long term health condition or they have vulnerable children with respiratory conditions living with them as confirmed by their health or social care professional.

1.2.4 This new criteria recognises that residents meeting the above criteria are specifically vulnerable to the cold and form a high percentage of the recorded number of people who die in the colder months. A process is already in place for confirming the health conditions with health and social care professionals and we will continue to use this.

1.3 Disabled Facilities Grants

- 1.3.1 In addition to the above the Council has a mandatory duty to administer Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) to enable residents to maintain their independence in their own home. Since April 2015 central Government funding for DFGs has come through the Better Care Fund (BCF). The BCF is allocated to upper-tier authorities by government and part of the allocation is ring fenced for DFG provision and passed onto District & Borough Councils. In the 2015 spending review the Government committed to an increase in Disabled Facilities Grant funding nationally from £220m to £394m in 2016/17, rising to £500m by 2019/20.
- 1.3.2 The BCF is a programme spanning both the NHS and local government. It has been created to improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable people, placing them at the centre of their care and support, and providing them with 'wraparound' fully integrated housing, health and social care, resulting in an improved experience and better quality of life.
- 1.3.3 The Department of Health has recently confirmed that *"Following the approach taken in 2015/16, the DFG will again be included within the Better Care Fund (BCF). This is to encourage areas to think strategically about the use of home aids/adaptations, use of technologies to support people in their own homes and to take a joined-up approach to improving outcomes across health, social care and housing"*.
- 1.3.4 For 2016/17 Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council (TMBC) has been awarded £917,000 through the BCF. This is an increase of £427,000 on previous years Government funding. The table below illustrates DFG activity and expenditure in recent years.

	Government Grant	Council Contribution	Total Budget	Number of DFGs completed	Total Expenditure
2012/13	£485,000	£208,000	£693,000	86 (4 Children)	£689,000
2013/14	£415,000	£265,000	£680,000	85 (4 Children)	£666,000
2014/15	£424,000	£228,000	£652,000	62 (3 Children)	£559,000
2015/16	£490,000	£280,000	£770,000	64 (5 Children)	£585,000

- 1.3.5 Members should note that in addition to the above Council expenditure, Circle Housing Russet (CHR) currently allocate a budget of £200,000 to undertake aids and adaptations for their tenants who would otherwise access Disabled Facilities Grants. Whilst this funding has been in place for a number of years, given the changing environment within which Housing Associations are now operating, this may be at risk.

- 1.3.6 Part of the reason for the increase in this year's allocation is due to the inclusion of the Social Care Capital Grant which was £2.1m for Kent County Council in 2015/16. Previously the social care capital grant that was paid to KCC has been used to fund minor equipment, ceiling track hoists and the Home Support Fund. The inclusion of this in the DFG allocation was unexpected and its announcement created a shortfall in funding for KCC of £2.1m to finance commitments for works already in place and a clear demand to justify its continuation. When the announcement regarding the cessation of the social care capital grant was made the following was also advised: *"In order to maximise value for money of central funding the Department of Health has concentrated its social care capital grant funding into the Disabled Facilities Grant, as research suggests it can support people to remain independent in their own homes – reducing or delaying the need for care and support, and improving the quality of life of residents."*
- 1.3.7 In order not to disadvantage the residents of Kent it was agreed across Kent that for 2016/17 the DFG allocation would be top sliced for each District & Borough by 16 per cent to enable KCC to fulfil existing commitments and meet demand for 2016/17 whilst other models of more integrated delivery are explored for future years as outlined in section 1.3.9 below. For us this equates to £147,000, leaving a grant of £770,000 for 2016/17.
- 1.3.8 This year's allocation includes mandatory DFGs but also allows spend on broader capital projects subject to Local Housing Authorities being able to meet their statutory duties in respect of DFGs. It is considered that the £770,000, which is a significant uplift from previous years, is sufficient to meet the statutory demand for DFGs and to provide an enhanced service without the need for the Council to contribute from its own resources.
- 1.3.9 In addition a Kent-wide project has been agreed to consider DFG work across Kent and the wider integration with social care and health around independent living. The key objectives of the project are to:
- Critically review existing interventions and identify options and make recommendations for the most efficient, effective and holistic way to deliver Disabled Facilities Grant in order to improve the customer journey, reduced timescales (waiting and delivery) and to maximise value for money and economies of scale in procurement of equipment and works.
 - Make recommendations for integrated delivery of DFGs and services funded through the SCCG, alongside opportunities to fully exploit technologies.
 - Support health and social care integration and deliver savings by making the most of the part that housing can play in keeping people independent in their homes; helping to prevent, delay or reduce care home placements and/or demand for other social care services, avoiding unnecessary

hospital admissions/readmissions or GP visits and facilitating timely hospital discharge

- Make best practice recommendations based on local and national guidance and successful models.
- Recognise the diverse nature of Kent and the need for services to be responsive to local needs.

1.4 Proposed Amendments DFG Policy

1.4.1 It is proposed that the Council introduces amendments to the Policy that encompasses discretionary and mandatory provision to enable a broader range of locally identified needs to be met, delivering quicker outcomes for residents through more flexible procedures that are easier to access and introduce local discretion.

1.4.2 It is important that we have both the flexibility and discretion within the grants process to facilitate budget spend and ensure that vulnerable tenants in private sector housing are able to access support.

1.4.3 The introduction of additional discretionary DFG grants alongside the mandatory DFG will increase the range of grant options available and allow TMBC to better tailor grant support to meet individual needs. Additional discretionary DFGs will include:

- Discretionary “top up” to mandatory DFG up to the equivalent of a mandatory DFG
- Relocation Assistance up to £5,000
- Urgent Hospital Discharge Grant up to £5,000
- Extension of the Handyperson Service
- Remove the need for a test of resources on grants less than £5,000

1.4.4 These proposals allow for a comprehensive range of works to deliver the Government’s aim of reducing reliance on primary and secondary care by taking preventative measures that enable people to remain living independently in their homes.

1.4.5 Should demand for these discretionary works exceed the increased allocation the discretionary elements will be scaled back or withdrawn. In other words, the budget for such discretionary works in any one year will be limited to the amount by which the grant allocation exceeds the budgeted mandatory DFG spend. For example, grant allocation £770,000 and budgeted mandatory DFG spend £665,000, budget for discretionary DFG grants £105,000.

1.5 Legal Implications

- 1.5.1 The Council has a mandatory duty to deliver adaptations through the Disabled Facility Grant scheme under the provisions of the Housing, Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996. Whilst it is able to offer additional discretionary assistance as provided for in the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002, such discretionary schemes must not disadvantage a person eligible to receive assistance under the mandatory scheme and the Council is required to publish a Policy on how it intends to use the powers under the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 to provide housing assistance.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.6.1 In line with average expenditure over the last two years, it is proposed that an annual budget of £60,000 be set for the Housing Assistance Policy for this and future years, of which £30,000 is to be met from the Council's own resources and £30,000 by way of grant repayments. This represents an annual saving of £30,000. It is proposed, for the time being, that the reserve fund is maintained to cover any shortfall in future grant repayments.
- 1.6.2 It is also proposed that a budget of up to £10,000 be made available each year for the next three years to fund modernisation of the Housing Service in accordance with the recent reorganisation in order to achieve efficiencies and improve customer outcomes, for example, developing existing systems so that they are fit for purpose, developing on line forms, mobile working and digital inclusion initiatives. This expenditure will be met in full from the Housing Assistance reserve. How this will work in practice will be brought forward as part of the forthcoming budget process.
- 1.6.3 With regard to DFGs the current approved 2016/17 budget is £665,000 funded by way of government grant of £490,000 via the Better Care Fund and £175,000 from the Council's own resources.
- 1.6.4 The budgeted mandatory DFG spend of £665,000 for 2016/17 can be met in full from the increased DFG grant allocation of £770,000 (currently the Capital Plan reflects a contribution from the Council's own resources of £175,000). It is proposed that a discretionary DFG budget be established representing the amount by which the grant allocation exceeds the budgeted mandatory DFG spend. As noted at paragraph 1.4.5 the discretionary DFG budget in any one year will be limited to the amount by which the grant allocation exceeds the budgeted mandatory DFG spend. The position is to be reviewed on an annual basis as grant announcements are made.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 As a statutory Housing Authority the Council has a duty to review and report on the housing conditions in the area. It is important that where funding is offered to improve housing conditions it is spent wisely and to best effect to achieve the desired outcomes.
- 1.7.2 Failure to provide housing assistance to private sector homeowners may contribute to rising levels of poor quality private sector housing and result in households with limited incomes exposed to risks to their health and safety.
- 1.7.3 As noted at paragraph 1.3.5, given the changing environment Housing Associations are now operating, funding allocated by Circle Housing Russet may be at risk.

1.8 Policy Considerations

- 1.8.1 The Housing Assistance Policy changes will make a positive contribution to targeting financial assistance to those most in need to improve their living conditions, thereby impacting the Policy agenda in relation to decent homes, healthy lifestyles, fuel poverty, safeguarding children and vulnerable adults and sustainability.
- 1.8.1 The changes will also contribute to achieving the desired outcomes in the Council's health inequalities action plan and the Council's key corporate priorities. The quality of the home has a significant impact on health and wellbeing. A warm, dry and secure home is associated with better health. The Building Research Establishment (BRE) has calculated that nationally poor housing costs the NHS at least £600 million per year.
- 1.8.2 Whilst it is recognised that the primary responsibility for repairing and maintaining a property rests with the owner, the Council has certain statutory responsibilities to fulfil and should take steps to protect and assist vulnerable members of the community while also providing advice to all residents to help them maintain their own homes.
- 1.8.3 The Care Act 2014 places responsibility on Local Authorities for providing information and advice so that people can make informed choices and for providing services or steps that prevent, delay or reduce the need for care and support. The Act also requires local authorities to co-operate with other local organisations and work to integrate services to promote well-being and improve quality and outcomes.

1.9 Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to **RECOMMEND** to Council that:

- 1) The proposed amendments to the Housing Assistance Policy and associated budget adjustments be approved;
- 2) The proposed amendments to the DFG policy and associated budget adjustments be approved; and
- 3) Members note a budgetary provision of up to £10,000 is set aside in each of the next three years, fully funded from the Housing Assistance reserve in order to modernise the Housing Service.

Background papers:

Nil

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