

PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING GRANTS ASSISTANCE POLICY REVIEW

Head of Service/Contact:	Rod Brown, Head of Housing & Community
Urgent Decision?(yes/no)	No
If yes, reason urgent decision required:	N/A
Annexes/Appendices (attached):	None
Other available papers (not attached):	Current Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy (modified March 2018).

Report summary

This report proposes amendments to the Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy, to provide more flexible use of the Better Care Fund allocation. The Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy was originally agreed by the Committee in June 2017 and launched in December 2017.

Recommendation (s)

- (1) That the Committee agrees to recommend to amend the Housing Grants Assistance Policy.**

1 Implications for the Council's Key Priorities, Service Plans and Sustainable Community Strategy

- 1.1 The Policy promotes our Key Priority of "Supporting our Community".

2 Background

- 2.1 In 2015, the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review announced a five year funding programme for the Disabled Facilities Grant Programme. The programme allowed for greater flexibility for the delivery of the Disabled Facilities Grant. Some Authorities opted to waive the financial means test for all applications, whilst allowing an automatic top-up to award grants of up to £45,000 regardless of the applicant's financial situation. Epsom and Ewell Borough Council wished to ensure that a wider range of residents, and those who were more vulnerable received assistance and thus adopted a Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy which introduced a wide range of discretionary assistance.

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- 2.2 This Committee approved the Private Sector Housing Grants Assistance Policy in June 2017, and it was launched in December 2017. Whilst the programme has been effectively implemented, Officers have considered that there are amendments necessary which would allow the Policy to provide even greater assistance to vulnerable residents.

3 Proposals

- 3.1 That the Policy is amended as follows:

(i) The Handyman Scheme

This has been a very successful scheme benefitting residents since 2006. The scheme was funded via Surrey County Council, and in recent years direct through the Better Care Fund. Whilst there appears to be support to continue the funding, this cannot be guaranteed. It is therefore proposed that the Handyman Scheme is encompassed within the Policy under a new section entitled "Handyperson and Small Works". The scheme would operate in the same way as current, but with greater reassurance that the scheme would be funded through the mandatory BCF Disabled Facilities Grant allocation.

(ii) Hospital to Home Service

That the Policy be adapted to enable support for the Council's Hospital to Home service which was launched in October 2018. It is recommended that where residents have been selected for assistance under the Hospital to Home service, that the means test is waived to allow for a rapid hospital discharge where urgent/remedial works are required to enable a person to return to their own home. Additional non-urgent works including Disabled Facilities Grant works would be subject to standard procedures, the waiver is intended to allow an expedited return to home only.

(iii) Flexibility for waiving means test financial contribution

Whilst the Policy has proved to be very effective, it has at times been hindered by the test of resources/means test which has not been significantly reviewed for several years. The implication of this is that there have been on occasion financial means tests which resulted in a required contribution of over £2,000, which the resident has been unable to meet, meaning that they are therefore ineligible to receive assistance.

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It is therefore proposed that in order to provide further assistance to vulnerable residents, the Policy for mandatory or discretionary works will disregard the means test contribution up to £5,000 (or higher where appropriate) if the Licensing, Grants and HIA Manager considers that requiring its payment would result in significant financial hardship for the resident, or if failing to provide assistance would result in significant risk of harm to the individual.

(iv) Flexibility for waiving the need for a financial means test

There have been urgent referrals made for assistance but it has not been possible to assess the resident's financial position in a timely manner. It is proposed that flexibility can be exercised to waive the need for a means test to be undertaken where it is not possible to obtain paperwork from the resident in a timely manner, in exceptional cases only, where there is an immediate risk to that individual.

(v) Top-up funding for mandatory grants

The current Policy allocates £60,000 for additional top-up funding of (up to) £15,000 per application. It is proposed that the reference to the £60,000 of allocated funding is removed so as to allow all cases to be determined on a case by case basis, subject to budget, in liaison with the Adult Social Care Team. The cap for additional top-up funding will remain at up to £15,000 per application.

(vi) Legal and land charges

The Policy makes reference to land and legal charges which may be imposed. It is proposed that the Policy is clarified so that any charges apply only to the cost of works i.e. the surveyors and ancillary costs and not Home Improvement Agency fees which would have already been taken from the original grant.

(vii) Policy re-name

To avoid confusion, and for greater clarity, it is proposed to rename the Policy to "Housing Grants Assistance Policy".

4 Financial and Manpower Implications

4.1 The revised Policy would be implemented and administered using existing resources. Funding for the scheme comes through the Better Care Fund allocation, there are no capital contributions to the scheme.

4.2 **Chief Finance Officer's comments:** None for the purposes of this report

5 Legal Implications (including implications for matters relating to equality)

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- 5.1 The Council has a general duty under the Equality Act 2010 to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act.
- 5.2 Having 'due regard' means consciously thinking about all three aims of the general duty as part of the decision making process at all levels. This means that equality issues must influence the decisions the Council takes both as an employer and as a deliverer or commissioner of services.
- 5.3 **Monitoring Officer's comments:** The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England & Wales) Order 2002 ("RRO") give local authorities powers to provide assistance to any person in order to adapt, improve and repair living accommodation. Assistance can be provided in any form and may be either unconditional or subject to conditions. Before exercising this power, the Council must adopt and publicise a policy. The policy must be followed when exercising the Council's powers under the RRO. If officers use any discretionary powers, these should be clearly documented. Where assistance is provided under the RRO, a legal charge can be registered at the Land Registry to secure repayment of the assistance given if the property is sold within a set period. All owners will need to sign a legal charge document and the charge should be registered at the Land Registry prior to any assistance being provided in order to protect recovery of the grant. A legal charge document will need to be drawn up by Legal Services prior to any assistance being granted in excess of the amount set out in the Housing Grants Assistance Policy.

6 Sustainability Policy and Community Safety Implications

- 6.1 None for the purposes of this report.

7 Partnerships

- 7.1 None for the purposes of this report.

8 Risk Assessment

- 8.1 The budget would continue to be closely monitored to ensure it is not exceeded. Should there be a risk of budget being exceeded then the priority would focus on progressing the mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants only.

9 Conclusion and Recommendations

- 9.1 That the Committee agrees to recommend to Council the adoption of the Policy revisions.

Ward(s) Affected: (All Wards);