

Decision by Portfolio Holder



Report reference: CRS-006-2019/20

Date of report: 23 March 2020

**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Commercial and Regulatory Services – Councillor A Patel

Author: Sally Devine (Ext) 4149 Democratic Services: J Leither

Subject: New service delivery for Private Sector Grants including Disabled Facilities Grants and revised Housing Assistance Policy

Decision:

- (1) To discontinue the CARE and Repair Service that operates separately and alongside the existing Private Sector Housing Grants and CARE Team;
- (2) To provide one streamlined service within a newly structured Grants Team to deliver Disabled Facility Grants and the Councils Housing Assistance Policy;
- (3) To agree the revised Housing Assistance Policy at Appendix 1 of this report that extends the scope of financial assistance available to our disabled residents and streamlines processes to facilitate a more effective and efficient service delivery of the Housing Assistance Policy.

ADVISORY NOTICE: <i>A Portfolio Holder may not take a decision on a matter on which he/she has declared a Pecuniary interest. A Portfolio Holder with a non-pecuniary interest must declare that interest when exercising delegated powers.</i>	
I have read and approve/ do not approve (delete as appropriate) the above decision:	
Comments/further action required: None	
Signed: Councillor A Patel	Date: 6 th April 2020
<i>Non-pecuniary interest declared by Portfolio Holder/ conflict of non-pecuniary interest declared by any other consulted Cabinet Member:</i> None	<i>Dispensation granted by Standards Committee:</i> Yes/No or n/a N/A
Office use only: Call-in period begins: 7 th April 2020	Expiry of Call-in period: 14 th April 2020

**After completion, one copy of this pro forma should be returned to
Democratic Services IMMEDIATELY**

Initialed as original copy by
Portfolio Holder:

Reason for decision:

The Private Sector Housing Grants and CARE Team deliver mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) through Central Government funding via Essex County Council, and discretionary financial assistance through the Councils Housing Assistance Policy for essential home repairs and improvements to qualifying residents and by helping to bring empty properties back to use. The CARE Service within the Grants Team was originally established as an in-house Home Improvement Agency but in more recent years it has been brought within the establishment of the Council, paid through the Housing General Fund and top sliced monies from the Better Care Fund.

A review of the Grants and CARE Team has been carried out and it has been identified that there is considerable overlap and duplication of work, skills and responsibilities between the Grants officers and CARE Caseworkers that can be simplified and streamlined to make the service more efficient and to maximise the potential to fully spend the allocated Better Care Funding, which has been significantly underspent in recent years.

It is recommended that the CARE service in its existing form is discontinued and that the entire Grants service is brought under one regime. The service to our grant applicants will be improved as they will always deal with a single dedicated officer rather than the disjointed process that currently exists, and they will continue to benefit from the same 'hand holding' service currently offered by the CARE Service. Vacant posts within the Team will not be filled to address the reduced staffing requirements and there will be no redundancy considerations.

The proposed restructure will result in a saving for the Council of approximately £36,000 per year as a result of reduced salary budget requirements and an annual database licence that will no longer be required.

In order to maximise delivery of grants and expenditure of the BCF for the benefit of our disabled residents, it is necessary to revise the Housing Assistance Policy. The proposed draft at Appendix 1 extends the scope of assistance that may be offered and removes barriers that currently slow down the process. Appendix 2 highlights the main changes.

Options considered and rejected

The continued funding of the Care and Repair Service is rejected because it does not offer good value for money and the service can be more effectively provided by incorporating within the existing Private Sector Grants Team.

To not revise the Housing Assistance Policy to offer discretionary Disabled Facilities Grants and increase the scope of financial assistance offered to disabled residents will impede the Council's ability to effectively utilise the unspent ring- fenced funding from previous years and going forward.

Background Report:

The Private Sector Housing Grants and CARE Team facilitate the provision of financial assistance to residents in the private sector. The Council has a statutory obligation to provide mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) and it also offers discretionary assistance through the Councils Housing Assistance Policy for essential home repairs and improvements to qualifying residents and to assist with bringing empty properties back to use.

The mandatory disabled facilities element of the service is funded by Essex County Council through the Better Care Fund towards the cost of adaptations to help eligible people to stay in their homes for longer, and live safer, healthier and more independent lives. The amount

awarded for 2019-20 was £855,956. The discretionary element of the Housing Assistance Policy and the Handy Person Scheme that the team also administer, is funded by the Council (£130,000 and £15,000 respectively for 2019-20).

CARE (Caring and Repairing in Epping Forest) was originally set up as an in-house Home Improvement Agency (HIA), running separately and alongside the Council's Private Sector Grants Team, to support the delivery of disabled adaptations for eligible applicants and to assist older people to benefit from essential repairs and home improvements through the Housing Assistance Policy. It provides a valuable service in helping residents who are unable or unwilling to deal with the grant application process and it takes over the whole responsibility for dealing with contractors, agreeing and monitoring works to completion, and arranging payments. CARE charge 15% of the cost of the works for this service, which is recoverable through the DFG. The advantage is that residents are likely to progress with essential works and adaptations where they may not have the means or will to do so themselves, thereby leading to a reduction in accidents and injuries in the home, reduced GP visits and hospitalisation and reduced strain on the NHS.

In 2003 the CARE Service was brought within the establishment of the Council, paid through the Housing General Fund and initially supported by additional funding for HIAs, from Essex County Council (ECC). However, in 2017 this funding was withdrawn and since then, with member approval, the equivalent balance of £51,000 has been paid from the Better Care Fund (BCF) Allocation for Disabled Facilities Grants.

The Better Care Fund allocation for the Council, which is ring fenced for delivery of DFGs has increased each year but has always been underspent. For the period 2017-2019, this amounts to £670,000 and a further £470,000 underspend is projected for 2020. The result is that the potential to assist as many eligible residents in need of adaptations is not being met and there is the risk that Councils who continually underspend, will have their funding allocation reduced in future years, which we clearly want to avoid.

A review of the Grants and CARE Team has been carried out as part of the Council's overall People Strategy and to align with the Council's overall Corporate Objective to ensure 'People live longer, healthier and independent lives, through promoting independence for older people and people with disabilities. It has looked at how best to structure the team and to identify areas for improved efficiency and effectiveness towards ensuring maximum Grant expenditure, to the advantage of our disabled residents, many of whom will be among the most vulnerable in the District.

The officers in the Grants team, administer the discretionary element of the Housing Assistance Policy and deal with DFGs in the same way as the CARE Caseworkers where an applicant does not want to use the CARE service. There is significant overlap and duplication of work, skills and responsibilities between the Grants officers and CARE staff that can be simplified and streamlined to cut time and make the service more efficient. It is important that a distinction is made between the mandatory and discretionary element of the work because the funding stream is different, but this can be easily managed by a clear and robust time recording process.

It is recommended that the CARE service in its existing form is discontinued and that the entire Grants service is brought under one regime which will be more streamlined and efficient by reducing processing times, cutting out duplication and simplifying the process for both officers and our customers. New ways of working, new systems and processes will also be introduced that will reduce paperwork, improve the delivery of the service and reduce the cost of providing the Grants Service.

The Team currently consists of 2.5FTE CARE Caseworkers (currently 1.5FTE vacant), 1.5FTE Grants Officers, 1FTE Technical Assistant (currently vacant) and 0.6FTE Grants Surveyor

contractor (vacant). The new Service can be delivered by 2FTE Grants officers, a 0.6FTE Grants Surveyor and a 1FTE Technical Assistant to carry out means testing and office administration. The existing vacant CARE Caseworker posts will not be filled, and the officer currently employed with a split 50:50 CARE caseworker: Grants Officer role, will be offered a full time Grants Officer post. The contracted Grants Surveyor post will be brought within the establishment, which, together with the vacant Technical Assistant post is currently being advertised with a view to recruitment in March/ April 2020.

The service to our grant applicants will be improved in that they will always deal with a single dedicated officer and point of contact from start to finish, rather than a disjointed process that currently exists; they will continue to benefit from the same 'hand holding' service as before, for which the same 15% charge will be applied; and the delivery of their required adaptations will be quicker and more residents as a whole will benefit through a more efficient administrative process that allows for maximising expenditure of the BCF.

The restructure will result in a salary saving of around £33,000 per annum. Other savings include the cost of the Foundations database (£2,847 p.a.) currently used by CARE which will no longer be required. In addition, the £51,000 BCF allocation to support the CARE service each year can be redirected to provide further adaptations for our DFG applicants.

The Handyperson Scheme provides a valuable service to older, vulnerable residents and includes small repair works and works around home security, trips and falls and home safety. This service, currently provided by the CARE service, will continue to be provided by the Grants Team. Additional staff resource is already accounted for in the existing establishment structure (and not included in the salary savings above), should this be necessary (0.5FTE vacant CARE caseworker post).

In order to maximise expenditure of the DFG budget allocation each year and to facilitate use of the historic underspend, it is necessary to review the Housing Assistance Policy to extend the scope of financial assistance to be offered in accordance with the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002. The proposed new Housing Assistance Policy is attached as Appendix 1 and is framed to increase expenditure opportunities, whilst targeting funds to those residents most in need. It is made clear that the discretionary element of the financial assistance will only be offered whilst funding allows and will be decided in accordance with the priorities set out within the policy. The main changes from the last policy, are explained as an Appendix to this report.

Resource Implications:

Discontinuing the CARE Service will give a reduction in staff costs of £33,105 per annum. There will also be IT savings of £2,847 each year as the Foundation database will not be required and the top slice allocation of £51,000 currently used to fund the CARE service can be redirected to fund disabled adaptations.

Legal and Governance Implications:

Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (as amended)
Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002
Housing Act 2004
Disabled Facilities Grant General Consent 2008
Disabled Facilities Grant Order 2008

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

DFGs provide essential financial assistance to help disabled residents live safely in their own homes for as long as they can or wish to. Extending the scope of the proposed Housing Assistance Policy and streamlining procedures will facilitate more efficient DFG expenditure to the benefit of our eligible residents.

The Decent Homes, Small Works and Empty Homes Repayable Assistance within the Policy facilitate essential works to ensure homes in the private sector are safe to live in and include provisions for improving energy efficiency and reduction of carbon footprint.

Consultation Undertaken: None

Background Papers: None

Impact Assessments:

Many of the measures included in the Housing Strategy 2017-22 and the Housing Assistance Policy target groups that are considered vulnerable, such as older people and families on low incomes, and disabled people. The draft Housing Assistance Policy will have a positive impact on the Council's statutory duty to promote equality and to help our most vulnerable residents live independently and safely in their home.

Risk Management:

There is the risk that funding for Grants and Loans is over committed in a particular financial year and monies are not available to pay on works carried out. This is mitigated by the development of a robust financial monitoring process to provide a clear record of grant approval/commitment and payment of financial assistance offered. This will provide a current up-to-date snapshot of grant performance and expenditure which will be reconciled by the Residential Team Manager at the end of each calendar month.

There is the risk that funding to the Council from the Better Care Fund to provide DFGs will be reduced in future years so that demand exceeds resource available. This is mitigated through the Housing Assistance Policy that informs of the Councils commitment towards mandatory grants and that the discretionary element is only offered whilst resources are available, and each case is considered on its merits.

Equality Analysis:

The Equality Act 2010 requires that the Public Sector Equality Duty is actively applied in decision-making. This means that the equality information provided to accompany this report is essential reading for all members involved in the consideration of this report. The equality analysis is provided as part of The Housing Strategy 2017-22.

Key Decision Reference (Y/N): N/A

Appendix 1: Draft Private Sector Grants Service Housing Assistance Policy

Attached separately to this document

Appendix 2: Main proposals for the new Housing Assistance Policy that differ from the current 2018 version

Discretionary Disabled Facility Grants – Repayable Assistance		
Para	Revision	Comments
6	Dual Residency of a disabled child	In cases where families separate, and a court order provides that residency of the subject child is split between the mother and father (or other designated guardian) the Council may consider a Discretionary DFG – Repayable Assistance for the other property. Maximum award of £10,000
7	Child in Foster Care	The Council may consider a Disabled Facilities Grant for a child in foster care providing that the likely length of care at that dwelling is expected to be years rather than months. Maximum award £10,000
8	Relocation Grant (This is the only discretionary grant available in the current Housing Assistance Policy)	A Discretionary Relocation DFG may be available to an applicant who owns or privately rents their dwelling if adaptation of their current home through a mandatory DFG is determined not to be a feasible or reasonable option and they are considering relocating to a suitable property they intend to purchase. Maximum award £10,000
9	Discretionary Top-up Assistance of up to £30,000	The maximum amount of mandatory DFG was set by statute in 2008 at £30,000. This is out of step with current building costs and may be insufficient to provide major adaptations to meet the needs of the disabled person (usually a child) and their family. Maximum award £30,000
12	Qualifying works	This section provides a list of adaptations that can be considered for discretionary DFG assistance to enable a disabled person to remain living in their home.
13	Non-means testing for Stairlift and Wet Room applications	DFG applicants requiring stairlift or wet room adaptations will not have to evidence financial means, thus contributing to falls prevention for the most vulnerable of our residents and reducing the financial burden on the NHS.
15	Changes to DFG Eligibility	Reinstating Council Tax Benefit (CTB) as a means-tested passport benefit for all grants.

15	Provide grant in exceptional cases to applicants unable to meet the means test contribution	Where an applicant is unable to meet their assessed financial contribution under the means-test for a mandatory DFG and in the absence of any suitable affordable alternative, the Council may, in exceptional circumstances, provide the DFG Assistance to enable the works to proceed.
16	Quotations	Amend the Policy to require 2 quotations for all DFG applications (1 estimate for stairlifts) Quotations must be itemised on the specification and schedule and provisional sums are generally not permitted
16	Service provided to manage DFG applications from start to finish, charged at 15% of the total cost of works.	All applicants are offered the choice of a full in-house service to administer and process their grant @ 15% cost of the works, which is recoverable in the DFG. Alternatively, they will be expected to manage it themselves
	Preferred Contractors	One preferred contractor list for all grants; a less rigid criteria for acceptance on to the list and a fairer tendering process to be introduced
34	Residential Social Landlords	Apart from mandatory DFGs, tenants of Registered Social Landlords (RSL) cannot apply for assistance under any other form of assistance contained within this policy. A written response for a financial contribution by the RSL is required before the DFG can proceed.
Discretionary Housing Assistance – Repayable Assistance		
4	Changes to Housing Assistance eligibility	Reinstating Council Tax Benefit (CTB) as a means-tested passport benefit for all grants.
4	Service provided to manage the applications from start to finish, charged at 15% of the total cost of works.	The Grants Team will administer and process the applicants grant @ 15% cost of the works, which is recoverable in the Housing Assistance award.
6	Means test requirement of property owner	Income and savings of all owners are considered in the means test; however (apart from Empty Homes Assistance), a non- resident owners' financial means is discounted
6	DIY	Works (materials and labour) carried out on a DIY basis will not be eligible for Housing Assistance
12.1	Small Works Repayable Assistance	Increase eligible assistance to a maximum of £5,000 per application or a maximum of £5,000 made up of more than one application over a 12-month period
12.2	Decent Homes Repayable Assistance	Increase eligible assistance to a maximum of £15,000 per application or a maximum of £15,000 made up of more than one application over a 12-month period
12.3	Empty Homes Repayable Assistance	Increase eligible assistance to a maximum of £15,000 per application.

12.4	Landlord's Energy Efficiency Repayable Assistance	Financial Assistance up to a maximum of £10,000 repayable to landlords of 'hard to treat properties', who have already carried out £3,500 of energy efficiency works, to bring a property to at least the legally required minimum EPC rating
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