

Report to: Executive Cabinet Member
Environmental Services

Bolton Council

Date: 16th October 2017

Report of: Director of Place

Report No:

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Report Title: **Amendments to Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy**

**Confidential/
(Non - Confidential)**

(Non - Confidential) This report does not contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public.

Purpose:

To provide an overview of the amendments to the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy to enable flexibilities in how Disabled Facilities Grant funding is spent.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that members approve the updated Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, including the main changes outlined in this report.

Decision:

Signed:

Leader / Executive Cabinet
Member

Monitoring Officer

Date:

1. Background

- 1.1 Bolton's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy is made under item 3 of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 Statutory Instrument No. 1860 (RRO). It has previously been reviewed and updated in 2005, 2009 and 2013. The RRO enables changes to private sector housing spend to be introduced in line with the requirements of each Local Authority and provides flexibility for local decisions on how investment in the private housing sector is spent.
- 1.2 The policy sets out the range of financial assistance that the Council will make available, together with the eligibility criteria and conditions that will be applied to each form of assistance. It also makes policy amendments to other statutory powers, in particular the provision of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) under the Housing Grants Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (as amended). The policy is flexible dependent on the financial assistance available and if further amendments to the policy can be accommodated.
- 1.3 Central Government made a commitment to increasing the DFG budget in recognition of the preventative role the provision of DFG's can have in supporting health and social care integration and keeping people out of hospital. To strengthen this relationship and encourage integration, the budget was moved to the Department of Health and now forms part of the Better Care Fund. This means that the way the money is spent is no longer solely the Council's decision but shared with the Bolton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). The DFG budget has been included in the partnership framework agreement relating to the commissioning of health and care services that the Council has entered into with the CCG in accordance with section 75 of the National Health Service Act 2006.
- 1.4 The policy amendments take account of the greatly increased national DFG budget and subsequent increase in Bolton. The additional funding available in Bolton is an opportunity to be innovative, test out new approaches and apply the principles of DFG to other living environments, whilst continuing the successful delivery of our core adaptations service. An additional amendment in relation to tackling empty properties is included
- 1.5 The proposals were discussed at a joint PDG for Anti-poverty and housing and Adult Social Care on the 20th September 2017. Members recommended the report progress for approval.

2. DFG Budgets

- 2.1 The Government allocation for the provision of DFG has increased by £1m each year for the past two years. Prior to this, the Council agreed to 'top up' DFG funding with its own resources to fulfil the demand for adaptations.

- 2.2 The budget for the provision of DFG in 2016/17 was £2.9m which included the Council's allocation of £500k and the Government allocation of £2,452,070. The Council also allocated an additional £1m for the remainder of 2015/16 and 2016/17. This increased the total budget available in 2016/17 to £3.5m. In 2017/18, Government allocated £2.6m to Bolton. With underspend from the previous year this has given a total budget of £4.2m for 2017/18. It is expected that the Government allocation will continue at least the same levels for the next two years.
- 2.3 DFG casework has remained consistent over the last few years, with the number of enquiries reducing slightly and the number of cases completed remaining at around 225 per year. However, the nature of the cases is increasingly complex and demand is expected to rise as the older population increases.

3. Summary of main changes

- 3.1 The majority of the changes to the Council's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy relate to the provision of DFG and the intention is to protect the core element of this service, which is to provide adaptations for individuals to enable them to continue to live independently at home for as long as possible. However, some of the changes are also about preparing for the future and ensuring that the Council has specialist housing interventions available for people with disabilities. Below is a summary of the changes to the Council's Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy (a full copy of the policy is attached as appendix 1.)

Increase in discretionary top up

- 3.2 Previous Private Sector Housing Assistance Policies have established a process for providing a discretionary top up to DFG cases which exceed the grant maximum of £30k. This is currently available up to £5,000 and has been in place for a number of years. If a case exceeds the increased amount of £35k, it is deferred to Adult Social Care to determine if an additional top up can be granted. This process can be lengthy and cause unnecessary delays for vulnerable customers.
- 3.3 The amendment to the policy will increase the amount of discretionary top up available for DFG to £10,000. This takes into account a number of changes that have occurred in recent years such as increased building costs and costs associated with increasing complexity of cases, particularly in relation to disabled children. This should also reduce the call on Social Care budgets and reduce the timescales in processing applications.

Means test

- 3.4 DFG is traditionally a means tested grant, however the means testing process is long, detailed and can require customers to provide large amounts of information that can cause delays to their application being processed. In cases where the overall cost of the adaptation is particularly low i.e. under £5k or where adaptations are required urgently, the means testing element of the process would be removed.
- 3.5 The policy amendment will also see the removal of the means test to cases which are assessed as 'Priority 1'. These are customers with the highest levels of need and/or cases where the customer has a life limiting illness. Removal of the means test will allow us to be as responsive as possible to the needs of these customers and allow them to have the adaptations they require in the fastest possible time within the DFG process. On average 26 priority 1 cases are completed each year. However, this would not apply in cases involving extensions.
- 3.6 The means test for 'non-complex' adaptations will also be removed. This will include, but not be limited to door widening, stair lifts, level access showers and ramps. In these lower value cases (usually under £5,000 per adaptation), means testing very rarely brings in a customer contribution and instead prolongs the waiting time for simple works that can be completed quickly.
- 3.7 In the last two years, only 38 out of 448 customers were required to make a contribution to the cost of their adaptation, contributing in total £31,500. Of these, only 8 were priority 1 cases and 17 related to stair lifts, level access shower or a combination of both. Removing the means test will allow us to process these cases much faster, decrease waiting times and free up officer time to dedicate to more complex cases.

Technology Enabled Care in new build properties

- 3.8 A change in the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy is also included to allow a proportion of the DFG budget to be utilised to support provision of Technology Enabled Care in new build specialist housing.
- 3.9 A number of the Council's Registered Provider partners are exploring opportunities to develop specialist accommodation for older and disabled people. Such schemes would provide suitable housing for residents with specific support needs to maintain their independence in a home based setting as opposed to requiring them to move into residential care. In some instances they may also provide short term accommodation to facilitate hospital discharge. Provision of this type of accommodation can provide substantial savings to the health and care economies.

- 3.10 Any such schemes that are developed would be expected to meet the Council's 'Bolton Standard' in terms of design and accessibility. Therefore, a proportion of the budget is made available to Registered Providers to assist with the provision of adaptations or Technology Enabled Care within affordable housing schemes. This will create environments that promote independent living and ensure that schemes in Bolton are delivered in line with national best practice. Applications from Registered Providers will be assessed on an individual scheme basis.

Supporting Care Home Excellence

- 3.11 The uplift in the DFG budget nationally and locally is partially due to the removal of the Social Care Capital Grant from the Better Care Fund. In Bolton, this was £750,000 in 2015/16. This funding was used to deliver improvement schemes in care settings. The Better Care Fund policy framework (2017-19) gives approval for DFG funding, as part of joint planning with the CCG and Adult Social Care, to be invested in wider social care capital projects.
- 3.12 A proportion of the DFG budget will be allocated to support adaptations and improvements in care settings, linked to the 'Care Home Excellence' programme. It will support those care homes which have high instances of falls and other incidents to reduce use of health services and improve quality of life. This could be through improvements to the building condition, provision of adaptations or exploring opportunities for Technology Enabled Care. It is also proposed to offer advice on environmental design and facilities management to enable care homes to plan strategically for future improvements.
- 3.13 Care homes represent a significant part of the health and care system in Bolton and are the primary place of residence for some of Bolton's most vulnerable older people. Utilising the DFG in this way will ensure that, for those people whose home is a residential or nursing setting, their home environment is safer, risk free and encourages increased independence.
- 3.14 Delivering this approach through DFG and within the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy enables the Council to influence how the money is spent and ensure it supports the principles of DFG. It will also demonstrate that housing services and DFG can effectively support the priorities of health and social care integration and also the locality plan, without the need to remove funding from DFG and place it in the wider Better Care Fund for this purpose.
- 3.15 An initial sum of £250,000 of DFG funding is allocated to test this approach in the first instance. This will be delivered jointly by Bolton Care and Repair and Adult Social Care, with the revenue element funded by Adult Social Care. A number of different funding options will be explored, such as grant repayments,

loans and match funding by the care home to ensure that the financial offer is relevant to each individual care home. However these options will require working up further to ensure that the Council's funding is protected.

Empty Properties

3.16 Spend allocated to empty properties has not been covered in previous versions of the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy. The financial mechanisms that support the Council to bring empty properties back into use will be included within the 2017 policy.

3.17 This will outline the processes and parameters of the following empty property schemes, which make use of private sector housing funding;

- Owner led approach
- Environmental improvements
- Purchase and repair

4. Equality Impact Assessment

4.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, the Council must have due regard to:

- Eliminating unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act;
- Advancing equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and
- Fostering good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

4.2 It is therefore important to consider how the proposals contained within this report may positively or negatively affect this work. To support this analysis, an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed for the proposals outlined in this report, and is attached at Appendix 2.

4.3 The EIA looks at the anticipated (positive and/or negative) impacts of the proposals on people from Bolton's diverse communities, and whether any group (or groups) is likely to be directly or indirectly differentially affected.

4.4 It is anticipated that the proposals will have a positive impact on people living with disabilities.

5. Recommendations

5.1 It is recommended that members approve the updated Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy, including the main changes outlined in this report.