

Portfolio Holder for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care

DATE	23 rd January 2023
REPORT OF	Carolina Borgstrom - Executive Director for Economy, Environment and Infrastructure
SUBJECT	Housing Assistance Policy
STATUS	Open
FORWARD PLAN REF NO:	PFHWASC 01/23/01

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

The Council has two clear strategic priorities – Stronger Economy and Stronger Communities. Within that second priority, it is important to adapt older and disabled people’s homes to help them live independently and safely. The proposed changes to the Housing Assistance policy (HAP) will help to speed up delivery and expand the reach and effectiveness of the Disabled Facility Grant (DFG) funds and thereby help more individuals, more quickly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Portfolio Holder for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Social Care:-

1. Approves the adoption of the revised Housing Assistance Policy as set out in Appendix 1.

REASONS FOR DECISION

The Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) (England and Wales) Order 2002 requires councils to publish a policy if it wishes to provide assistance in a range of areas relating to private sector housing. The attached Housing Assistance Policy (Appendix 1) sets out the mandatory and discretionary financial assistance, including conditions and eligibility criteria, that North East Lincolnshire Council wishes to offer residents living in the borough. The review and implementation of the revised Housing Assistance Policy should deliver quicker and better outcomes for service users.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

- 1.1 As part of our review of Disabled Facilities Grants, a decision was taken to review the Housing Assistance Policy and reduce overall waiting times. The revised policy also addresses the issue of making support more accessible.
- 1.2 North East Lincolnshire Council is committed to ensuring that all of our communities’ voices are listened to and that their needs are recognised. The policy has been out to consultation for 6 weeks (1st December 2022 to 11th January 2023), with all key stakeholders informed either through direct communication/email or social media.
- 1.3 The Policy makes several recommendations to improve accessibility to grant

funding for vulnerable households, including the introduction of Trusted Assessors, who will support the pressure on the Occupational Therapy Team. The Royal College of Occupational Therapists acknowledge there is a national shortage of qualified therapists. Trusted Assessors will take on the simple adaptations, leaving the qualified Occupational Therapists to tackle complex cases.

- 1.4 Through consultation, we asked residents and stakeholders their thoughts on the policy review/changes and if they considered it tackled priorities in the area.

Responses Overview

- 1.5 The consultation was viewed 163 times, with 63 responses started and 41 completed. 22 potential respondents dropped out and did not finish the questions set.

How Residents/Stakeholders Responded

(a) Priorities

- 1.6 We asked what priorities the Council should concentrate on using grant/loan funding. The majority of respondents felt that funding should be used to reduce the number of empty homes. The ranking was as follows:

1. Reduction in Empty Homes
2. Reducing housing disrepair
3. Improving Thermal Efficiency in homes
4. Reducing Fuel Poverty

- 1.6 Most respondents were keen to see the Council maximising external funding, using North East Lincolnshire Council capital funding.

(b) Safety and security of older persons and other vulnerable people living in their own home

- 1.7 61% of respondents strongly agreed that funding should be spent to improve safety. They strongly agreed that the policy would support security and safety of vulnerable residents. A further 21% agreed.

- 1.8 Comments included “everyone has the same rights on a case-by-case basis”. In response, the Council states that funding is limited and therefore needs to be provided to those households at most risk and in need through a qualifying process.

(c) Reducing cases of fuel poverty

- 1.9 42% of respondents strongly agreed that the policy would support reducing fuel poverty, with a further 29% agreeing.

- 1.10 Comments included “people need to budget better”. In these times of increasing fuel costs, it is acknowledged that some households are unable to meet energy

costs, which previously they could. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to support households who genuinely are unable to meet the costs.

(d) Reduction of housing disrepair which could have the most impact on the health of the occupants, and major adaptations with disabilities

1.11 54% of people strongly agreed that the policy would support improving housing disrepair, with a further 33% agreeing.

1.12 Comments included “my husband wasn’t eligible as he can go up some stairs and the policy needs amending”. In response, the gentleman is eligible for an Occupational Therapist assessment. If the applicant is unhappy with this assessment, they should appeal through the Occupational Therapist complaints process.

1.13 “There needs to be better partnership working and understanding so that we get value for money”. In response: The Council agrees with this comment, which is why they are completing a review of the adaptation process, to ensure that partnership working is maximised, waiting times are reduced and value for money improved.

(e) Reduction of empty homes

1.14 65% strongly agreed the policy would support a reduction in the number of empty homes, with a further 21% agreeing.

1.15 Comments included “your plan will devalue housing”. In response, we acknowledge that residents may have concerns that the Council will house homeless households in properties across the borough. The Council will be putting in support to help homeless households to manage their tenancy successfully, so they can move onto more permanent accommodation, and this has had some success.

(f) Improvement in the thermal efficiency of the housing stock

1.16 45% agreed that the policy would support improving the energy efficiency of housing, with a further 43% strongly agreeing.

1.17 Comments included “This will limit the amount of housing available locally as people/landlords cannot afford this and middle income would have to pay”.

1.18 In response, the call to improve thermal efficiency of housing is driven by central government in response to the climate crisis. Funding is available for landlords to improve their rented homes stock, with interest free loans offered by the Council to top up any part payment required as part of the grant criteria. The Council has offered these loans to support landlords to fund improvements, help tenants who live in homes which are uneconomic to heat and reduce carbon emissions.

(g) Maximising opportunities for external funding for the benefit of meeting the above priorities

1.19 52% strongly agreed that the policy would support accessing additional external funding, for example providing grants or loans to top up government funding for energy efficiency schemes. A further 36% agreed with the policy.

1.20 Comments included “I am not sure there is a lot of partnership working”.

1.21 In response, the Council is working with Homes England, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to access funding. In addition, they have established a partnership with the Midlands Energy Hub who access funding for the Midlands region. It is acknowledged that partnership working could be improved with some stakeholders, and we would welcome those discussions.

(h) How confident do you feel the policy will allow the right support to tackle the problems of poor-quality housing?

1.22 5% were very confident, 19% were confident and 39% were neither confident nor unconfident.

1.23 Comments included “The criteria prior to amendments to policies restrict people to a high standard as it is”

1.24 In response, we have assumed the comment refers to limiting accessibility to schemes. Funding has an eligibility criterion to ensure public funding is spent where the need is most. Cases can be assessed on an individual basis, based on need.

(i) The maximum amount of a safe warm and dry grant has been increased from £5,000 to £10,000, to take into consideration an increase in construction costs. Do you agree this is sufficient?

1.25 15% strongly agree and 45% agree.

1.26 Comments included “It shouldn’t be capped”.

1.27 In response, the grant is capped to ensure we can support as many people as possible with a limited budget. Cases can be reviewed in exceptional circumstances, where costs exceed the maximum amount of a grant.

1.28 “Costs increasing constantly so unsure if this will be sufficient”

1.29 In response, the Council will continue to monitor costs and how these impact on the policy. The Council may consider increasing the maximum amount based on evidence.

(j) Many homes suffering from fuel poverty are traditional terrace houses, often occupied by lower income households. Energy repayment loans are available to eligible homeowners and landlords as a contribution towards larger Government Grants. Do you consider this is a good way to support homeowners and landlords?

- 1.30 Only 10% strongly agreed and 30% agreed with assistance.
- 1.31 Comments included, “just gets people into more debt” and “It should be grants”.
- 1.32 In response, whilst ideally the Council would like to support homeowners with grants, there is limited funding to support this. This scheme will be reviewed through the duration of the policy.
- 1.33 “Landlords can afford to pay for improvements, they just prefer for others to pay for it”.
- 1.34 In response, not all landlords can afford to pay for improvements that were not originally budgeted for when they bought the property. Also, rental values can be low in some parts of the town, which means landlords require support to carry out energy efficiency works for the benefit of their tenant.
- (k) Owners of empty properties offered the opportunity to lease their property to provide housing for homeless households
- 1.35 25% strongly agreed and 37% agreed with the scheme.
- 1.36 Comments included: “Landlords of empty property should be made to improve or sell. They chose to have properties”.
- 1.37 In response: Many landlords may have had a change of circumstances and be unable to finance repairs to bring the properties back into use. The scheme is aimed at supporting landlords who are willing to lease the property for a period time, to meet an unmet housing need within the homelessness service.
- (l) Opting to remove means testing for Disabled Facilities Grants
- 1.38 44% strongly agreed and 17% agreed with this option.
- 1.39 Comments included: “Means testing is the only way to ensure public money is only going where it is needed”.
- 1.40 In response, a study was completed to consider what funding was recovered through means testing. This was very small as most applicants were eligible without a contribution. The situation will be monitored throughout the term of the policy and could be amended, should circumstances change.
- 1.41 “Does Personal Independence Payments (PIP) cover the cost of an adaptation?”
- 1.42 In response, no, the cost is covered by a DFG grant as PIP covers the cost of care provision to support independence.
- (k) Opting to use Trusted Assessors for Simple Adaptations
- 1.43 20% strongly agreed and 48% agreed with this option.
- 1.44 Comments included: “What qualifies them to do the role? What qualifies them to

understand the needs of the service users?”

1.45 In response, the Trusted Assessors will be trained on a course approved by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. This is a measure recommended in the industry to relieve pressure on a burdened service and support clients who are often waiting many months for simple adaptations.

1.46 “It’s another case of doing things on the cheap”.

1.47 In response, this is a course of action recommended by the Royal College of Occupational Therapists. This is not a cost saving exercise. This is recommended route to reduce waiting times and support local households who are struggling with day-to-day activities and who require simple adaptations.

(l) Discretionary Funding for Palliative Care, hospital discharge, dementia, and assistive technology

1.48 61% agreed and 21% strongly agreed with these schemes.

1.49 Comments included: “It won’t change anything.....you can change policies all you like but it won’t change the practicalities of real-life situations”.

1.50 In response, we welcome these comments as the Council would like to explore what the challenges are, and the grant is hoped to be the start of supporting hospital discharge and remove those “real-life” barriers.

1.51 “Lack of detail.....to support rental items, how to get them, how to remove, and how to store.

1.52 In response, these items are not covered in the Housing Assistance Policy as they are operational concerns and will be included in the Standard Operating Procedures.

(m) Ambitions to Recycle Funding

1.53 15% strongly agreed and 45% agreed with this approach. 5% strongly disagreed and a further 5% disagreed.

1.54 Comments included: “Seems unfair”.

1.55 In response, the Council has a limited amount of funding. Recycling funding means that the Council can support more people with less funding. Recycling funding refers mainly to discretionary funding and not mandatory grant funding.

(n) How satisfied were respondents with the overall policy

1.56 43% neither disagreed nor agreed with the policy. 10% were very satisfied and 33% were satisfied. Only 12% were either very dissatisfied or dissatisfied.

1.57 “There is insufficient detail for me to comment”.

1.58 In response, this is a high-level document. Additional detail is provided in the standard operating procedures which are currently under development with partners.

(o) Consultation Responses to Consider missing Priorities

1.59 We asked respondents to comment if we had missed any priorities within our policy. The purpose of this was to make sure there were no gaps in policy.

Response

1.60 "I think the council should start buying properties off private landlords that are section 21 good tenants, good tenants should not be evicted".

1.61 In response, Landlords serve notice on "good tenants" for a variety of reasons, which could include a wish to sell the property. Any tenant under threat of a Section 21 notice should contact the Homeless Team who may be able to save the tenancy and prevent the notice from being served.

1.62 "I have had some recent cases with paediatrics where the child has required a 'safe space' sleep system due to behaviours that challenge, to de-escalate meltdowns and reduce risk of harm to the child, parent/carer, and property. A lot of the time, these cases are complex and require re-housing to a more suitable property. So, when I have applied for DFG for the sleep system because the family are wanting to move, the panel have refused the sleep system and recommended a portable version, which is not suitable in many cases. These systems are screwed to the floor but can be unscrewed and moved to a new property if the person moves, re-housing takes time and in the meantime the child and others are still at risk. In my opinion, there should be some provision for the approval of devices - not necessarily adaptations, which can be easily transported to a new home in exceptional cases".

1.63 In response, if the family is looking to move, then they are ineligible for an adaptation. Adaptations provide access to accommodation and therefore may not be eligible for grant funding.

1.64 "I find it seems like NELC pass the book a lot when it comes to housing belonging to LHP".

1.65 In response, the Council transferred its properties to Lincolnshire Housing Partnership (formerly Shoreline) who are a separate organisation and therefore the Council are unable to make decisions on their behalf.

1.66 "Does this apply to homeowners" & "I am not sure that there is a fair share to private homeowners".

1.67 In response, most mandatory and discretionary funding is accessible by homeowners.

Additional Comments

- 1.68 “This is not significantly different from many elements in the existing policy, however detail on how delivered seems to be missing and it appears to create extra layers and risk of confusion. For instance, under the minor adaptation’s element.....this suggests up to £15000 direct access via spa, but if more complex needs would the person need a referral to several different teams so to this route for minor adaptations then other elements carved off to other areas? This seems messy and potentially confusing for the person. Similarly, the fast-track grant talks about direct access to trusted assessors for replacement items, what if there is a complex adaptation and replacement items - does that case go to two different teams? Discretionary top up talks about exceptional circumstances for landlords to access but what would these exceptional circumstance be, surely it needs clearly defining to ensure not open to misinterpretation and abuse? Assistive technology grant, it is not clear whether where there were a combination of items needed, would this be opportunity for £5000 on top of the £30,000? Stay warm grant refers to a medical clinician referral, who would this be? GP? but they might not have seen home property so would they be willing to refer? Home appreciation loan states it could be used where not eligible for DFG, but could it be on top of? There seems little detail on what referrals would go to different options i.e., OT or trusted assessor and aren’t there also some non-OT support staff already working on DFG too? There seems little detail on who can refer for the various funding options and who the decision makers are re the various grant options also. How will this all pull together to ensure one-person is not being assisted by a number of different people due to the different elements identified and then potential for all this to be in conflict or at the very least chaos in the property as different works at different times. Some good ideas but detail on how accessed or implemented effectively seems to be lacking to be able to comment effectively on this. In terms of landlords, what’s their buy in for accessing and supporting? Has this research been done re empty homes and re exceptional circumstances top up?”
- 1.69 In response, it is appreciated that the policy does not move away from what is working in the current policy. Details on how it will be delivered will be covered in the Standard Operating Procedures. It is appreciated that there will be different layers which will add complexity; however, there will be systems in place which are quite simple, which will be simple to ensure that there is more than one referral for one person. Trusted Assessors will be trained to consider if the applicant should be referred to the Occupational Therapist, due to case being more complex. We have not clearly defined exceptional circumstances as this could provide a barrier to some cases, where we have a genuine case which we have not come across in the past. A business case will need to be provided and assurance that the tenant will not be evicted through either a longer-term lease; also, the likelihood that the family can be rehoused. With a shortage of some types of housing, it is often difficult to rehouse families, and therefore consideration must be given to keeping them in their current home, wherever possible, thus avoiding additional pressures on other services, for example the Homeless Team. We acknowledge your comments regarding the Home Appreciation Loan. The Stay Warm scheme is currently in operation and means that residents with a condition made worse by living in a cold home can access funding. GP’s or other clinicians are currently providing referrals. On receipt, a

surveyor attends the property to carry out a survey. The GP or clinician would not be expected to provide a property check. Works are completed by Equans, who are the delivery partner for the Council. The teams use the same database and do meet to discuss cases where multiple works are due to be completed to mitigate the risk of confusion. Research has been carried out into the Empty Homes leasing scheme. There is a shortage of temporary accommodation for homeless households who often end up in bed and breakfast for several weeks. This is not an ideal solution and putting them in a house will provide an opportunity to improve outcomes, to help them maintain future tenancies. This has proven to work since COVID, and the Council remain committed to expanding this way of supporting households and landlords of empty properties.

Summary

1.70 Many of the comments received covered operational issues or were general comments which were not substantiated. The comments/feedback received provided an opportunity to amend the report in the following areas:

- Updated timescale definitions in line with local procedures.
- Removal of reference to means testing.
- Minor Adaptations - removal of referring minor adaptations straight to a provider, without assessment by a Trusted Assessor or Occupational Therapist.
- Relocation Grant - clarification that the grant is open to owner occupiers and those living in rented accommodation.
- Discretionary Top-Up Grant - clarification that the grant could amount to £75,000.
- Assistive Technology - clarification that the grant can be used in addition to a DFG or Fast Track Grant.
- Stay Warm Scheme - added insulation as eligible works. Also, the grant can be match funded with grants available to improve the energy efficiency of housing, where the EPC is D and above. This supports low-income households accessing government energy efficiency funding where a top up is required and there is a Category 1 hazard.
- Safe, Warm and Dry Emergency Repair Grant - added Category 2 D&E hazards in the case of damp and mould.
- Home Appreciation Loan - removed mention of DFG's as the top up grant should remove the need for a top up loan to complete an adaptation. Also, DFG's are not means tested so all applicants should be eligible without the need for a loan.

2. RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The change of approach to managing DFGs is essential in order to improve performance, especially given the difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff by the OT service and Equans. If no action is taken to reduce the amount of work on OTs and Equans, performance levels will not improve, and this will continue to have an adverse impact on the wellbeing of individuals applying for DFGs.

The report deems the revised policy as an opportunity rather than a risk, noting feedback from the public and partners.

3. OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Doing nothing. That is not recommended as if no action is taken, performance levels will not improve, and this will continue to have an adverse impact on the impact of individuals applying for DFGs.

4. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

By improving the DFG process, it will improve the lives of those applicants, and this will improve the council's reputation locally.

5. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The annual capital allocation to the Council is currently £3.2m (which is ring fenced to spend only on DFGs from the Better Care Fund), with a further ear-marked reserve of £3.7m. The proposed changes to the DFG policy and processes will be fully funded from within this provision.

6. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

Applications for DFGs are received from children and young people. These applications are considered on their own merits, in accordance with the Housing Assistance Policy. The proposed new approach will speed up these applications and provide the adaptations more quickly to those individuals affected.

7. CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no implications to climate change and the environment arising from this report.

8. CONSULTATION WITH SCRUTINY

The draft Housing Assistance Policy was considered by the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel on 30th November 2022. At that meeting, Members fully endorsed the proposed changes to the policy.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The proposal changes to the Housing Assistance Policy aim to use the external Disabled Grant funding available for these types of works and activity in a more effective manner.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Constitutionally, a portfolio holder has delegated powers to approve modifications to existing policies affecting the services within the Portfolio (including those having council wide implications). The modifications sought fall into this category,

11 HUMAN RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS

There are no known human resources implications. As a result, no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Strategic Workforce Lead.

12 WARD IMPLICATIONS

There will be applicants for DFGs from all Wards.

13 BACKGROUND PAPERS

Meeting of the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel – 30 March 2022
[Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Panel | Democracy \(nelincs.gov.uk\)](https://nelincs.gov.uk)

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