

# Private Housing Assistance Policy



<b>Report to:</b>	Cabinet
<b>Date:</b>	30 November 2023
<b>Portfolio Holder:</b>	Councillor Nicky Purse, Portfolio Holder for Environment and Sustainability
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	Norah Nolan, Interim Assistant Director – Environment (01279) 446132
<b>Contributing Officer:</b>	Chris Bennett, Interim Environmental Health Manager (01279) 446113
<b>Key Decision:</b>	No
<b>Forward Plan:</b>	Forward Plan number I016276
<b>Call In:</b>	This item is subject to call in procedures
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	Improve Council Services
<b>Wards Affected:</b>	None specifically

## Recommended that:

- A** Cabinet approves the revised Housing Assistance Policy attached as Appendix A to the report.
- B** Subject to recommendation A, delegates authority to the appropriate Assistant Director, in consultation with the appropriate Portfolio Holder, to make such minor or inconsequential amendments to the policy and to approve procedures for giving it effect as may be necessary from time to time.

## Reason for decision

- A** Adopting the proposed policy will give the council authority to provide greater flexibility to help with home adaptations that is not currently available through statutory Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) and existing policy.

## **Other Options**

- A** No other options have been considered other than Statutory Legislation/Guidance

## **Background**

1. Adapting homes for people with disabilities in the private sector greatly valued as a way of increasing their independence from institutional and social care and can ensure that people receiving treatment can be discharged safely.
2. The council's own housing stock residents cannot be considered under the provisions of this policy. The council has its own budget and internal policy and procedure for dealing with necessary and appropriate adaptations in council owned homes.
3. National policy designed to better join-up health and social care services led to the pooling of funding streams from the NHS and local government into the Better Care Fund. This is administered by Health and Wellbeing Boards to help more people manage their own health and wellbeing and live independently in their communities for as long as possible. Government funding for DFGs was a part of the pooled resource, and funding for home adaptations is now provided through the Better Care Fund.
4. The Government, recognising the value of home adaptation, has increased the funding allocated in recent years. For 2022/2023 the allocation to the council for home adaptations was £905,627.
5. The council, subject to resources, has a wide discretion to give assistance with home adaptations to people with disabilities, provided that it does so in accord with published policy. Increased funding now permits the council to offer assistance that could complement or extend the help available under the mandatory DFG regime to make adaptations more flexible, more rapid, and more affordable, and that could ensure that as far as practicable, the available funding is used to help Harlow residents.

## **Issues/Proposals**

6. The council has consulted with the County Council and Foundations (The National Body for DFG & Home Improvement Agencies in England) to identify the ways in which it could best use available resources to overcome issues that might affect service users. The measures described in the draft policy set out at Appendix A are calculated to offer the most useful forms of help achievable using available support from the Better Care Fund. It is proposed that the policy be adopted so that the Council can offer help in the ways described.
7. The current Housing Assistance Policy, approved in 2019, capped the Fast Track Grant to a maximum of £10,000 towards the cost of providing safe access to a home and

between levels (e.g., stairlift) in a home necessary to permit prompt discharge from hospital, or to avoid the risk of hospital admission. Since 2019 and post Covid-19, there have been significant increases in costs, for example the average cost of a curved stairlift is £8,247 and the average cost of ramp access with door widening is £5,187. Therefore, this presents a combined cost of £13,434. This revised policy increases this Fast Track Grant to £15,000 to reflect the price increases. This increase can be met within the existing fund allocation.

8. This new policy will also allow for a discretionary grant enabling any adaptation costing £15,000 or less to be provided without a means test if it has been assessed as necessary and appropriate by an Occupational Therapist and meets all the other criteria and considerations and subject to sufficient funds being available. This new discretionary grant will reduce existing barriers and potentially speed up the grant process. This new discretionary grant can be financed within the existing fund allocation.
9. The Housing Renewal Grants (Services and Charges) Order 1996 specified the services and charges which can be properly included within an application for a DFG.
10. The council provides a comprehensive in-house Disabled Facilities Grants Service on behalf of eligible applicants. Briefly, it handles all aspects of the grants process on behalf of the client including but not restricted to the following:
  - a) Completion of all application forms and paperwork
  - b) Title Checks
  - c) Obtaining details for means testing
  - d) Obtaining Building Regulations Approval
  - e) Obtaining Planning Permission
  - f) Dealing with Occupational Therapists
  - g) Preparing plans for consultation
  - h) Preparation of specification of works
  - i) Tendering to contractors
  - j) Checking quotations
  - k) Overseeing works on site
  - l) Dealing with unforeseen works, snagging items

#### m) Paying contractors

11. In accordance with the DFG Guidance, the council is permitted to charge a fee from the Better Care Fund for the above mentioned list of services. The council will charge a fee of 12% on top of the aggregate final spend for that financial year on all housing assistance grants. A benchmarking exercise has been conducted with available data from the region and this fee represents the lower end of fees charged.
12. The 12% fee is deducted at the end of the financial year from the Better Care Fund allocation. Subject to approval, for the 2023/24 financial year, the 12% fee will only apply to spend aggregated on or after the 1 December 2023. The cost of this fee can be met from within the existing fund allocation.

### **Implications**

#### **Equalities and Diversity**

An Equality Impact Decision Tree has been completed and attached as appendix B. A full Equality Impact Assessment is required but not as a priority and can be scheduled for later on in the year.

#### **Climate Change**

None specific.

#### **Communities and Environment**

The proposals set out in the report will facilitate the Council being better able to respond to need in the community. Working alongside our partners the policy should help to alleviate blockages within the health system by enabling residents to continue/resume independent living wherever possible in line with the revised Housing Assistance Policy.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

#### **Finance**

The proposals set out within this report and the Housing Assistance Policy will be funded through the existing grants available as set out in the report.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance

#### **Governance and Corporate Services**

The new policy does include changes to the thresholds for grants and it is therefore important that a EQIA is undertaken prior to implementation.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Services

#### **Housing**

We support the recommendations in the report.

Author: Neil Euesden, Interim Director of Housing

## **Strategic Growth and Regeneration**

The revised policy is appropriate, but it will be important that early advice is sought from the Council's Planning team on planning and building control matters.

Author: Andrew Bramidge, Chief Executive

## **Appendices**

Appendix A – Housing Assistance Policy

Appendix B – Equalities Impact Decision Tree

## **Background Papers**

Existing policy: Private housing assistance policy.pdf (harlow.gov.uk) –

<https://www.harlow.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Private%20housing%20assistance%20policy.pdf>

Core guidance: Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) delivery: Guidance for Local Authorities in England (publishing.service.gov.uk) –

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6245b9ac8fa8f527744f0683/DFG\\_Guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6245b9ac8fa8f527744f0683/DFG_Guidance.pdf)

## **Glossary of terms/abbreviations used**

DFG- Disabled Facilities Grant